JEFF NOON

CHANNEL SKIN

CHANNEL SK1N

Jeff Noon

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He did also bring a lantern with pictures in glass, to make strange things appear on a wall, very pretty.

-The Diary of Samuel Pepys, August 19, 1666

A mighty haze of mystic, magic rays
Is all about us in the blue.
And in sight and sound they trace
Living pictures out of space,
To bring a new wonder to you.

-Lyrics by James Dyrenforth, music by Kenneth Leslie-Smith. Song performed by Adele Dixon as part of the BBC's first scheduled television broadcast, November 2, 1936

We no longer have roots, we have aerials.

-McKenzie Wark, 1994

From the News Channel

...Next month sees the launch of the Klein-Zecker broadcasting signal, which is expected to replace the standard digital signal in the majority of domestic receivers. The signal utilises the new Fractal Wave technology developed by Klein-Zecker Laboratories, and promises to bring Meta-Reality sound and vision into people's homes. Industry chiefs are keen for the changeover to take place, hoping for increased revenues from advertisers and audience alike, revenue much needed in the current downturn. However, a few voices have spoken out against the signal, raising fears of saturation effects...

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Nola walked down to the river.

A small village had formed itself along the bank. A line of ramshackle shops, a cafe, caravans, tents, a wooden hut where the cabbies waited for trade. People were sitting around in groups, drinking and smoking. A semi-legal phone centre flickered with red and yellow lights. Random messages drifted out from the store's loudspeaker system, voice fragments plucked from twilight by the latest model of scanner.

I give too much of myself...

Good memories, a few bad...

That's my trouble, see...I love too much...

Some new kind of game, man. That's what we need...

She just kills me sometimes...

Soon, I promise. This weekend...

Are you still there? Hello?...

Anybody...

Nola crossed over the bridge.

A lone boat horn called, a bird cried in answer. The moon hung low above the water.

On the other side the city opened out and welcomed Nola in all its dirtblown beauty, its air of crowded loneliness. This is what she loved, this one line of latitude at this exact time, these slow minutes where the light gave way to darkness. *Now life begins.* The neon figures clinging to the walls and storefronts clicked on, their luminous bodies of gold and green decorated with images of next week's big products.

People hurried along close by.

Eyes down, fixed to portapops, checking out the latest fashions, music gossip, stock prices. Fingers clicking and jabbing, hooked on digifix.

A couple of glances her way. Then eyes averted.

Nola was used to it.

Adverts for the Pleasure Dome shimmered from rooftops and windows.

Beep. Beep. Beep Beep Beep.

Her telebug jingled in her pocket, and she pictured the signal floating in towards her in tiny blue pulses. Her skin tingled. Lately now, she had become sensitive to such images, such feelings.

Transmission. Open to contact.

Definitely, she was plugging into something.

That's why none of this made sense. There had to be some kind of mistake, some miscalculation.

Nola flicked the bug open, checking the screen.

Christina's face greeted her with that certain look she had, that straight-line grimace. Wanting to know where Nola was, no doubt, saying how could you walk out like this, without your minder, you never know what might happen. Some such.

Nola gave it a shut-down. No words.

What could she say?

She stepped into a darkened shop doorway.

One day a week George came round to see her, a friendly visit, a drink and chat, with Christina in tandem. They talked of Nola's wellbeing, general health, her place in the world, any reports from the public sphere. And then George would show her the latest projected sales figures. They'd scan the daily image counts together. And every week that special smile of his.

But something was different this time.

The twinkle still there of course, eyes darkly aglint, but tightened at the frown lines, held in place. And no figures presented. Not this time.

Nola dearest...

George's voice. Soothing, comforting.

No need for panic.

But his eyes, his eyes. Direct contact. Then flicker.

We're on top of this.

He was lying, Nola sensed it.

Everyone believes in you. The whole team.

Now this had been too much. She'd run from the news, out of the flat. All she wanted was to lose herself in the city, here, tonight, just walking along, a stroll in cool air and then a drink or two, some kind of release. That's all. Just to find a haven somewhere, imagine, the way it used to be, finding a rundown club or a bar with normal people doing normal things. No entourage, no bodyguards, no reporters beaming on her, no glamacams, no zoom lenses. But just getting drunk and dancing and flirting madly and making the most of being alive with some little cash left in your pockets, enough, just enough to burn a pathway through the dark and slide down slow towards daylight maybe with a chosen man alongside, somebody known or unknown, still awake, still buzzing, watching the sun come up.

That would do it.

A car moved slowly along, windows fully open, music pounding forth, the sheer bass throb noise of it setting the streets alive. Across

the way two people were dancing to the beat, limbs and flesh moving together, held tight.

Love. There it is. What it looks like. Feels like.

Lyrics clicked along inside Nola's head:

I just wanna, I wanna
get to know you
I wanna (I just wanna)
really want to get to know you
the real you!

She couldn't help herself from singing.

A passerby looked, nodded, smiled, that moment of awkward recognition. Nola nodded back, walked out, pulling her scarf across her mouth, turning herself into nobody. The mask in place.

You never know.

There are people out there who mean you harm. Stalkers and freaks, all those who latch onto public faces as their own property, who want to drain your fever, steal the heat, see what it's made of.

Memories.

Management talk. The first month of the programme. Day sixteen, lesson five: Dealing with Fame. George in full flow.

You have two products:
Your image and your voice.
Sell them on your own terms.

Nola slipped into a private club in Soho, one of the few places she could visit and be assured of privacy. The room was designer dark, stale with perfume, sticky with spillage from overpriced cocktails. Here, usually, nobody cared about her. Everybody was either clawing their way up or clinging on desperately, on the way down. No questions asked.

She bought a drink the colour of bright cherries, and the sugary sweet alcohol hit her system almost immediately.

She drank it in two gulps.

Bliss.

So who the hell was that laughing at her? Behind her back, she could hear them sniggering.

Turn around...

Nobody.

Silent faces, eyes averted.

Nola ordered another drink, more of the same.

She was only twenty-three. Time yet, time to live. Belief ran through her non-stop, awake or asleep.

I just wanna
I wanna
get to

get to know you
I wanna (I just wanna)
really
(How the hell did it go now? Concentrate!)
I really want to get to know the REAL you.
All of you
I just wanna TOUCH you, just (wanna) touch you, the REAL you
I just wanna...
That was good, wasn't it? Was that good?
How could she tell?

Words, words. They gave her these words to sing and she sang them. Body and soul, all that she had, lips pressed up close and warm to the microphone, that breathy whisper that everybody loved in her, that the critics picked up from the off, first single, that people copied on the streets, singing along in pubs, at parties, worldwide.

'It's all about the music, Nola. How the true people, the working people, sing their hearts out in songs of fantasy and loss and love. That's how they live and move and breathe, in rhythm to music.'

Georgie Boy speaking again, of course, his whole philosophy taken on board.

Time now, time to break away?
I really want to get to know the REAL you.
All of you.

Damn. Sometimes she wanted to just stretch out and kiss music on the lips and and and and GRAB music by the neck and SQUEEZE! Until, until...

Nola reached for her bug and called his number.

No answer.

She rang her assistant, saying, 'Christina. Hi. I need you to find George for me.'

'Nola? Where are you?'
'What?'
'Where are you?'
'In a bar.'
'In public?' That edge of concern in the voice.
'I'm safe.'
'You're drinking?'
'Of course.'
'Amongst your own kind?'

Nola looked around, eyeing the clientele. 'It will do.'

A pause then, before Christina said, 'I was worried, back in the flat. You sounded so bad.'

'That's fine. I'm over that. Are you still at my place?'
'No.'

‘Where?’

‘I’m at home.’

‘Is George with you?’

‘No.’

‘Where is he? He’s not answering.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I need to speak to him.’

‘Really, Nola. Everything’s good.’

‘What did he say, after I’d left?’

‘Not a lot.’

She was holding back. Nola could sense it.

‘Christina, you’re meant to be helping me.’

‘I am. You know I would always--’

‘I’m not feeling it. Tell me the truth.’

Silence on the line, moments of static haze.

Then Christina’s voice, quiet, purposeful: ‘Why don’t you come round here, Nola? We can have a good long chat, like the old days. Get stoned. I can get a couple of guys round, what do you say.’

‘I’m good.’

‘Are you sure? We can charge it to the company, call it therapy.’

‘Chris. I need to talk to George. It’s personal.’

Christina paused and breathed on line. ‘We’ve been through this before, you do know that? In other years, with other girls and boys.’

‘Really?’

‘It’s a setback, that’s all.’

‘A set-back? Right. And just how low are we?’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘What number are we?’

A pause. And then quietly: ‘Thirty-six.’

Nola sighed, hearing that. She broke the connection.

Thirty-six...

Damn it.

That was a projected status ranking based on legit sales across all media, alongside image counts, name recognition indices, estimated illegal downloads, press mentions, gossip graphs, drip-feed from rumour hounds, grapevine checkers, the whole mad panoply merged into one handy little packet of information.

A number.

That’s what it all came down to.

Nola felt dazed.

Thirty-six. Too low.

She would talk to George tomorrow, telling him that she needed to get out there, do some appearances, but properly this time, live, singing live, no miming, and a real band, no tapes. The fuzz and

burrrrr of jacks placed in sockets, fingers on strings, the wrong notes, slippage. Contact. Maybe we can do something good before the figures go public.

It's the only way, George. The only way.

This is what she would say.

Yeah. This was good. Keep it grounded.

Be strong. Fight back.

Nola finished the drink in hand and left the club.

Street air. Cold then warm against the face as the neon leered closer. She saw a man approaching, glamacam in hand, and she flinched away from him. But he shuffled on past her, his prey elsewhere, lens set on other delights.

Nola walked along, keeping to the shadows, the small areas of blindness amid the colour and flash of the city. A giant animated image rose above the streets. Her own face projected large up there, moving, fashioned from light, from money and desire. Nola's face. Nola's eyes sparkling. Blur. Then silver. Gemstone eyes. Imitation eyes.

Nola stared at the face of shiver and stardust.

Sometimes all of this still feels like a dream, a dream of stardust and red-carpet magic, and one cold grey morning I'll wake up back where I started from, alone, back in the old town.

From across the road a group of drunken teenagers called out her name. Girls, all of them.

Nola! Hey. Nola Blue!

She waved back, suddenly thankful for the recognition.

But what was it they were saying? Their voices had a mocking tone. It was like they knew already, even before the weekly status charts were made public. They were calling her a music death fallout zone, a slidedown, a loser, a no-use nobody, out of luck, out of time.

Everybody knew everything these days, way ahead of the sponsored channels.

Everybody was tuned in.

Nola! Nola!

What number you at?

Nola baby!

What's your standing? How's your grade?

36, baby!

36!

Nola stared at the girls. They stared back. Blank looks now. Voices silent.

Had they even spoken to her?

Nola trembled.

The girls laughed together, passing remarks back and forth,

making glad of the world in general, of boys and music and shop-bought glamour and such forth. Their telebugs glowed in luminous blues and yellows and sang with flexitext melodies that danced in dots of light above the screens.

Come here honey, honey, bang my drum.

There go the girls, walking on, singing a song, another song, a new song. Somebody else's song. Probably, most of them were vocalists or dancers in the making, their names and dreams jotted down on numerous talent-show waiting lists.

If you ain't got the fever, you ain't gonna come.

Nola felt faint. Crushed.

Zxxxttttttt...

There was a strange buzzing noise in her head. Painful. Insistent. Sharp. It felt like some kind of call sign was trapped in the skull, something beamed in from another planet.

What could she do?

These kids were only a few years younger than her, and yet their fashions, their slang, even their choice of hairstyle, they were all alien artefacts. Once, a few weeks ago even, she would have called them fans. But not now. Nothing can be held in trust for ever. Music was accelerating, burning itself to sparks and powder and ash on the road of spikes, and Nola had always loved that aspect, that crazy headlong rush of brilliance never quite catching itself. But now, was she really too slow to keep up, too slow to set her wings aflame? The public looked elsewhere and here she was, coming in low with only her third release.

The numbers were messed up, they had to be. Some glitch in the system.

36.

36.

36.

Most acts out of the George Gold stable had at least half a dozen hits before they started the sonic drift-away, the slow ride into darkness, silence. Nola could hear the DJs talking already, making scorn: *And just about scraping in this week we have Nola Blue with 'I Just Wanna Feel (The Real You)'. Dearie me, Baby Blue's hit the speed bumps.*

She couldn't help feeling worried.

George was sure to let her go now. That was it. That was the look she had seen in his eyes, back at the flat. Dismissal.

36. 36. 36.

But Nola had always had more in mind.

She was in this for life. A fact. She was the next Jio, the next Beneeca, the next Yoni Yoni, the next girl star, the next and the next, all rolled into one. Not some throwaway toy, pull the string and hear

her sing! Not that. Nola was the dream of herself coming real, the years of hard work scoping out the future piece by piece and never giving way, never giving in. She had songs, songs of her own to sing one day, songs that would shock the world into silence.

Fact.

No. No backing down. She would do this.

Here now

alone, adrift

in charge of herself.

Nola Blue. One and only!

One and goddamn fucking only!

Make way!

All she'd desired when younger, from just being a kid with a cheap plastic keyboard struggling to get the words and the melody down, all those crazy patterns and changes that floated through her mind.

Nine years old, lighting a flicker.

Nola! What number you at? Nola baby!

A group of revellers approached along the street, all laughing and gleeful.

Nola turned away.

Voices.

What number?

Thirty-six, baby. Thirty-six!

Thirty-six and falling fast.

Her tongue moved within her mouth, wetting the gums. There was a strange metallic taste. Now her hands started to itch. Her skull rang with noise.

And there she stood, alone, waiting for the moment to pass.

Nola blinked.

Her fingernails scratched at her palms.

Body signals.

It was painful to begin with, but now as the noise in her head rose in pitch, she started to feel it differently. The sound rang clean and true. It was exactly in tune with her blood, her bones. Her flesh glowed with sudden desire. It made her want to dance, to fall into somebody's arms, a stranger's arms.

The body is right. The body knows.

The body sings!

Nola pranced and tingled, step by step.

Needing privacy, she ducked into an alleyway.

Narrow. Dim, dirty. Scuttle of something moving away. The smell of burnt food, leftovers. Wisps of grey smoke from a vent. And now Nola's voice rose up from her throat, unbidden, filling her head and

shining forth in love,

out loud,

halfway melodic:

No blues like gemstone blues.

The line just coming to her like that, made up as she stood there. But what did it mean? Oh, right: seeing her own face on the animated display earlier, projected eyes glimmering that supernatural blue.

Again, try:

No blues like the gemstone blues, shining,

Night sparkles.

(Good tune, better that time.)

No blues like a white moon shining

Down the sky, unfolding.

(And repeat. Possible chord change here.)

Down the sky unfolding

Night sparkles

Dreams unfolding.

No cares for now. Only singing. Like she used to do, bedroom bound, just singing to herself, writing lyrics down as they came to her. Nonsense poetry most of the time, with the occasional two-line phrase sounding more than okay, making her wonder where it all came from. And just grabbing hold of it then and scrawling the words down, thinking: *I can do this, I can really do this!* And where before there was nothing at all, now a song, or half a song, or a quarter of a song existed.

Again. Keep going:

No blues like the blue-day news

Of falling, stalling.

(No. Crap. Again! Sing now.)

No blues like the king and queen

Calling, falling

Down the sky of burnt-out stars.

(Sing!)

Night sparkles

Calling out for love…

(No. Cliché.)

Calling out for lovers.

(Yes!)

Night-sparkle gemstone bluuuues

Calling out for lovers everywhere

Calling…

Uh…

Nola stopped.

Shadows moving.

A noise from further down the alley.

Focus:

A man was gazing at her from where he sat, slumped down against the filthy wall. Eyes fuzzy, wet. Misty with drink. But dressed in a dinner jacket, crisp white shirt, black bow tie.

'What do you want?' Nola asked.

No answer at first. Then, a well-to-do accent: 'That's a nice song, my love.'

Nola hesitated. 'I'm just...Well, you know, making it up as I go along.'

'You should...'

'What? I can't hear you.'

'You should do it for a living.'

Nola laughed. 'I guess so. I'll try that.'

The man tipped his bottle of red wine at her. Smiled. 'Your very good health.'

Nola walked out, hailed a taxi and headed back across the river. The night-blossomed city of drugs and crystals and spice and perfume and neon dancers and electric passion glowed in the water, inverted.

She felt better now, on track for something as yet unseen.

Just keep singing, that's all that matters. Yes.

Mouth, lips, tongue, music, words, meanings.

Reaching people. *Touching them*.

Her face in the cab window...half reflected...the roadside seen through the image.

The ringing in her head still there,

but quiet now,

ambient.

Blinking her eyes to the pulse of the street-lights, as they passed by one by one.

Yellow sodium haze.

blink
flicker

blink
flicker

A slight pain in the stomach.

Sudden cold.

-2-

The flat was empty, dusted and polished, perfectly at ease with itself, comforting, expertly maintained. Shiny where it had to be shiny, matt where it had to be matt.

Silence.

Nola stood there in the centre of the room, looking from left to right and back again.

How strange...

All the usual items were to be seen, the usual furniture. A smooth plastic seat-covering warm against her fingers, the red and gold circles of the carpet design, the well-chosen pictures, the scattered magazines. The visionplex unit waiting on its shelf, beneath the viewing screen. All was in place. The walls were decorated in exactly the same patterns and shades as she was used to, so why then...

Why this sudden feeling, that she'd entered the wrong apartment by mistake?

Nola held her breath.

Waited.

Hoping that when she breathed again, everything would click back into place.

Waiting...

Breathe.

No, the feeling remained.

Through the living room window the river gleamed in blue darkness lit by passing boats.

Nola's apartment took up half a floor of a newly built tower. She could look out over the city. Nearby stood other apartment blocks and complexes, where other wealthy people, deserving or otherwise, lived in splendour. Windows were alight or not, ones and zeros. A code of living, of sleeping, at home, away. Nola's eyes moved across vistas. Curtains drawn, curtains open. People alone or in pairs. No families, as such. This was not a place for children. In several observed rooms colours danced across screens, or figures moved from room to room and back. A young couple sat on a couch, laughing together.

Nola watched them.

They moved closer to each other,

playing a game, teasing...

closer

into a kiss.

Ah…that moment…

Nola studied the passion.

The song came back to her, the one from the alleyway. Three notes rising, and then one falling away, into minor. She picked up her guitar and tried to remember how it went.

A few words here and there.

Sparkles. Night.

Here the chord change. Another.

But no melody, not really. Whereas before…

What was it? *Sparkles in the night. Stars? Jewels?*

Billboard face, fake gemstone eyes all aglow. The sudden click of inspiration.

Some kind of blues. The sky unfolding…

No. Too late, too far. Too much distance between herself and whatever it was that might have been.

Night-sparkle gemstone something

Calling out for…

Nola lay down the instrument.

She grabbed a bottle of beer from the kitchen and came back into the living room to slump down on the couch. She picked up the remote control and switched on the visionplex.

Click.

Buzz. Burning sound. Brightness. Colour.

Image.

The viewing screen stretched halfway along the wall, and more than halfway to the ceiling, a vast expanse of dark shining mirror now brought to life, allowing pictures and voices to fill the room.

Relaxing, Nola sank back into the cushions. She sipped at the beer, idly watching and listening as she flicked through the channels.

Click.

Onwards.

Click, click, click.

Football, comedy, cookery, explosions, sex, the current war, old wars, cradle snatching, speeding cars, dancing, do-it-yourself, even more wars of years past, a close-up of a fist hitting a man's cheek, crunch of bone, spray of blood, a teddy bear, plague fever, adverts, madness.

Finally…

She found a music show where her main rival was sitting on a pink bench next to a young kid scarcely out of school. He was interviewing her. They talked wittily to each other in sweet words of praise and mutual delight. Two mouths dripping with wonderful inanities, as scripted.

Boy and girl. They were both wearing sailor suits.

Come here honey, honey, bang my drum.

If you ain't got the fever, you ain't gonna come.

Now the rival's latest release was playing.

Click, click,

Click.

Nola's finger jabbed repeatedly at the buttons, causing the images on screen to flood and melt together as the programmes flowed by, merging into each other. Sub windows opened up and vanished as she moved through the web channels, the ethercasts, ephemeral programmes of vapour and dust, fragments and whispers. She passed through Shimmertown where the shimmers gathered, the countless endless messages that lasted for only 44 seconds before they faded from the screen. Nola tried to read a couple, failed to catch them in time, moved on:

from station to station, haze to spark

signal to signal.

Then she stopped.

What was that sound, that noise?

Music.

Her own music.

Click, click.

Nola flicked back through the last few selections until she found it, a web-cable fuzzcast, fragile, lodged in the low-rent frequencies.

Click.

The new video, the new song being promoted.

She got up from the couch, moving closer to the screen.

There she was.

Nola Blue.

The images jumped and pulsed.

Zoom!

Zoom shot hit the singer's face like a bomb shock.

But she just laughed. Nola laughed in the eyes of the camera and then turned, spinning on her heels, dropping down to a dead

STOP!

Bang. On the dot. Halfway to her knees and then up again and away, singing now.

(I just wanna, I wanna get to know you.)

Dancing now, moving in time to the music, playing to the tracking shot as it kept pace with her, along the studio floor and then out, outside.

(You know I wanna

I just wanna

I really wanna…)

Out.

Bright glare of sunlight jarring the lens.

Jump cut.

Along the urban riverbank where the young man was waiting with his gang of toughs.

(I wanna get to know the real you.)

The young man was waiting just for her and then he too was dancing his own steps, moving away from the gang, moving with Nola but always keeping one or two or three or four twists and turns ahead of her.

(I wanna touch you. I just wanna…)

And no matter how she tried to stay in pursuit, no matter how loudly or how passionately she sang, he was always ahead, this young man, always on the edge of being lost…

Nola watched herself on the screen.

She could hardly recognise the face as her own, so often had she been transformed by the star-making process. Made-over, made-up, powdered. Jigged and rejigged. Extended, and then digitalised to within an inch of her flesh or so it felt, post-production, until there was hardly anything of herself left up there.

Hardly anything at all.

Even her voice, her lovely voice made by nature, by the good genes of the poor mother and bad father, even her born-to-sing singing voice was all chopped-up and rearranged, auto-tuned, remixed beyond any measure of her own tongue.

It was like another person existed.

That was it.

Another version of her own face and body. Some weird little abstract entity who lived on the other side of the screen. A young person who looked like Nola looked, talked and walked as she did, sang and danced like she did, spelt her name the same way, using the same letters in the same order; this second woman, this double, with the same silhouette, wearing the same clothes, clouded and veiled by the same fully moussed-up and layered cascade of hair.

The same goddamn teeth even.

Gleaming like a showgirl. Plastic white scrape and bleach job, all paid for by George himself, against future royalties, of course.

Name, face, teeth, skin, clothes, lips, eyes.

Here she was.

Here she was on the screen.

The exact same person.

Nola Blue. Music Star.

But it wasn't her. It just wasn't her.

Who the hell was it?

Nola reached out her hand and touched the screen.

Tingle fuzz. Heat.

The glass lay between them, separating the two beings from each other.

Nola studied her created persona. The mouth, especially. This painted maw as it worked to keep the song alive, the lips moving in time to the beat she kept inside herself.

Sparkle mouth, sparkle eyes.

Lovely sheen of lovely skin.

And yet which was more authentic, her real-life human body, or the image of her body? One bound by flesh and blood and blemish and breath; the other glorified, elevated, set ablaze with computerised passion.

Both of them constructed, both paid for.

Nola watched herself dancing.

Now slow...

Slooooooow.

Moving it down easily as the song reaches toward its climax and the handsome young man succumbs at last

whispering, suddenly loving,

suddenly realising, falling into the singer's waiting and willing arms.

The kiss.

Ah, the sweet lingering touch of lips on lips.

Final words of the song, final drumbeat.

Video fade-out to black.

Gone.

...fizsxts...

Moment of silence.

Blank screen.

And when was the last time she had kissed or been kissed, really kissed, tongue to tongue, hot breath mingling in the dark of the mouth, when? When?

Nola vaguely recalled her last true boyfriend, from the village where she grew up through her teenage years.

What was his name now?

No, she couldn't remember.

Where was he, these days? What was he doing?

His face. His skin. Like her own back then, marked only by young time. His mouth. Whispers of loving you forever.

Ages ago, or so it seemed. Another life. And herself a different person.

Fame kills normality, it burns up closeness.

Nola felt tears pricking behind her eyes.

She'd finished the beer without really thinking about it, and that, on top of the two cocktails at the bar, and the drink earlier, when George had come round...

Well, she wasn't used to it. Too much regime. Do this, do that. Stay fit, healthy, focussed.

Nola stared at the screen.

Two pundits now occupied the space, fair to middling guys with seriously abundant attitude.

One smirked, the other frowned. Both nodded.

The first widened her eyes. 'It's the third single from the album.'

The other replied: 'That's the trouble. Overexposure.'

'Correct. Nola's charm is draining away. What little charm there was, to begin with.'

'Oh, she had enough, to begin with. More than enough.'

'But now? Somewhat pallid, think I.'

'Certainly, she is wasted on this material. Have you heard the demo tracks?'

'You're one up on me there, Andy.'

'Early days material, before Gold Enterprises got hold of her.'

'Good, is it?'

'More than averagely good, I would say. Her own songs. Now that's what she needs to be doing.'

'Well she needs something.'

'It's the George Gold attitude, isn't it. Mister King Pop himself, in charge of the system.'

'Gold is *old*.'

'The system no longer works.'

'Check the status figures, kiddo. Thirty-six? Next step: accelerated decline.'

'All I'm saying, Marty, is wait and see. Maybe Nola will break loose.'

'Too late! I hear a bubble bursting.'

Click.

Nola jumped to another programme.

One more. Another.

Click, click.

Anything but that. Anything but her own self being dissected, poked and prodded like a cute media specimen: broken down, licked at, wrapped up, halfway discarded.

Nola went back to the couch.

Click, click, click.

Her finger pressed idly now at the buttons, moving further out, beyond the legal channels. Her set decoded encryptions on the sly, calling up temporary signal jumps. *Click, clikk, clikck*. Out to the telesphere's edge, where the spectrum blurred into mist and static. Here buzzed the fractalcasts, quarter-tuned pirate stations stealing frequencies for an hour or two. Cable dreams and nightmares. Political

rants, home sex videos, karaoke soaps, real-life domestic arguments, porno-dramas, hyper-specialist dating agencies, bidding wars, medical fibre optics, ghost broadcasts, security surveillance footage, glamacam exposures, old-time ballroom dancers, blurry car crashes, flower arranging, real-time feeds from the street where little kids with pixel faces were singing the new urban folk ballads of guns and blood.

So many thousands of microgenres.

Everybody was on camera these days, everybody.

Click, click.

Nola chanced upon an old movie, black and white, one she had not seen before. The story was trite, overly romantic, but certain images seemed to have a fix of their own, to be more like memories:

A black cat walking through a garden where a fountain sprayed arcs of water in sunlight.

A teenage girl flying a kite.

A broken-down car resting at the edge of a lake, its back seat occupied by the corpse of a businessman.

The images glowed with a light of their own.

Images. Moments. Slowing down.

Molten flow.

Nola managed one more click of the remote, one more sleepy finger press,

suddenly tired,

lulled by the sound and the vision

spellbound.

Image: a man's face, mist-painted. He smiled.

Soft glow of the screen

like a charm cast over the room,

over the viewer as she lay there,

over Nola as she lay there quietly, eyes staring, and then drooping, softly closing; two lovely lashed portals to let one last glimmer of light in, and then no more.

Darkness.

The remote control fell to the carpet.

And by half past one

Nola Blue lay fast

asleep.

~~~

The gentle blue-bronze light of the screen shimmered across her face.

Characters spoke to each other,

gently, covered in soft static,
~~~

unheard.

A clock ticked.

Outside Nola's apartment block, the warm air stirred. The tangle of aerials and satellite dishes on the building's roof reached for the moon that hung full but half hidden in clouds. Invisible waves of information moved through the air. Now and again, vehicles passed quietly along the avenue below, briefly disturbing this spectral glade of the capital.

A solitary nightbird flew across,

heading for the river.

Night gathered itself into the darkest hour, tilted over, and then began the long

measured

fade

towards dawn.

Nola barely stirred. She moaned once or twice, dreaming perhaps.

Dreaming that something moved just beneath her skin, some strange small creature of light and sound.

Sszzzztzs

Infection took place.

And still the screen flickered

with image.

-3-

The struggle towards waking.

Lights flickering...on and off...

A voice...

Breathing...

A woman's voice...

But not hers...not her own...

Ahhh...must try to...find the way now...

Finally, the voice stopped.

Nola's eyes came open.

Head throbbing, painful.

She pressed hard at her face to re-engage with herself, with her own body, but all she could truly summon up was a feeling of being hollow inside.

Nola was lying there in the semi-gloom.

Her tongue moved around her mouth; again, the taste of burnt metal. And that buzzing noise inside her head, a steady drone.

Her left forearm ached, the skin tinged red.

She felt strangely unattached, as though she might slowly float away from the couch and hover above it without any means of support.

Dreams. Half remembered.

Catch them...

The lights stuttering. A woman talking: *What the hell was that?* Then darkness. And then?

No. They drifted away.

Traces. Pictures.

Smoke.

Vanished.

Her eyes opened and closed.

The screen made a noise, a crackling sound. Nola looked towards the visionplex.

It was still on, still playing.

The voices she had heard in her sleep were coming from there, from the set. The woman still talking, a man answering now. Two characters. Two angry, loving characters in a drama, that was all, heard from dreamland.

But which channel? Which programme? She could not make it

out properly. The figures blurred.

Too much drink last night. Too much.

She wasn't used to it.

Yes, she must've stumbled in drunk and fallen asleep right here in front of the wall screen, like this, fully clothed, leaving the visionplex on all night. It was not the way she did things, not usually.

Nola focussed.

The people faded on the screen.

Silence now.

No pictures. No words.

What was wrong?

And yet, bending closer...

The faint hum of electrostatic.

Fizzle, fizszle...

The noise in Nola's head sounded like two wires, like two hot stripped-bare wires reaching out towards connection.

Fzzttztzstz...

Nola stared at the blank grey screen, transfixed.

She watched and listened. Seeing, hearing...

Flashes of static, snowdrifts.

Random noise bursts.

Fzzxtsststss!

Shapes. Shapes in the grey.

Figures?

Half seen glimpses.

And her own face in reflection.

One more character.

Nola didn't know what to do. She felt bound to the screen for some reason. It was claiming her eyes, craving attention even now, with only a powdery static fuzz in place.

In the flickers, find yourself...

Nola rubbed at her temples.

Time?

Wristwatch. Blur. Eye squint. Tighten...

5:05

She looked at the window.

Dark still. But a glint of sunlight maybe.

Early yet. Maybe there was time to climb into bed, to get some proper sleep before Christina came round. Maybe that was the best option. A lot of work to do today.

The screen made a noise. It changed colour, brightening, filled now with wavering lines: light grey, cream, grey blue, violet, yellow. Nothing could be seen as yet, not properly, but within these shapes, noises were heard: scuffling sounds, hurried nervous footsteps, voices

now.

Somebody whispering, fearful.

Nola listened closely, inching forward.

Are you there? Are you still there?

Nobody answered.

The sound of breaking glass.

A human cry.

Ahhh...

Weeping.

Nola leaned forward.

The screen blossomed into light. Images.

The programme.

A family sitting around a dinner table. The man and the woman as before, but delineated now, given types to play: a father and mother, two children with them.

The youngest of them, the daughter...crying.

Some kind of soap opera, or personal drama. It must have been on the whole time, just some trouble with the reception, that was all. Faulty signals.

The mother was screaming, shouting. The father's head was bowed down; the children in shock, saddened.

Nola gazed at this spectacle in some kind of relief, she could not explain why. Her own fingernails were pressing hard into her palms, modelled on the father's actions.

His hands in close-up,

nails digging into flesh.

Nola's own hands.

The pain was good, and she felt the sudden gulping rush of a media high, old-school style, the pre-digital needle to the heart. And behind that, a nagging doubt, a fear.

Unnameable as yet, unknown.

That taste in the mouth.

Skin tingles all over.

Skullbuzz.

Nola stood and walked through into the kitchen area, turning on the overhead strip-light. She poured herself a glass of water and drank it down with two aspirins.

Powder on the tongue. Ice-cold liquid.

Shiver of contact.

Her fingertips burned.

Mouth fuzzy.

Feeling bad.

Supposed to be working today.

How was she supposed to...

Headache.

No matter what she did.

Strange.

She steadied herself, grabbing hold of the kitchen counter.

The room lost focus.

Click.

Back in place.

Maybe it was time, maybe go to the doctor.

Soon.

Yes. Talk to Christina about it.

Maybe.

Click.

Room blur.

Click.

Clear once more, every detail of sink and countertop and cooker sharp, real, overly real.

Nola walked back into the living area.

The wall-screen played on.

Commercial break. Some minor celebrity figure dashing through a house of treasures, speaking of facts, numbers, units sold, usages thereof, the life sparkle, the one hundred different usages of this one, brilliant product. Images of switches being pulled, buttons pressed, a child's face all smile, all need, all shining pink happiness. The product itself unseen, only talked about, only fantasised over. Now the logo, the final line:

Purchase now, before your friends do.

Be the first! Become the subject of discussion at work and in the home!

Yes.

All is good.

The Bliss Machine lives on.

Here we are gathered...

A presenter spoke in reverent tones of programmes to come, all the mystical pleasure to be viewed and reviewed later on this day, into the night, next week, oh such delight to be accessed at your leisure, when and where you wish!

Nola sat down. She heard secret prayers, the chatter decoded.

Dearest viewers,

Here we meet on each side of the glass

To sizzle and purge

and plug our souls in.

To lick the screen for static

To burn our eyes with dazzle.

Daily, nightly, twenty-four seven

Week upon week
Life-long
We will download, upload
and drown ourselves gleefully
At the electric well
Of glitter,
Of poison and moonshine.
Why not join us?
Nola found the remote.
Click.
Gone. All silent, all blank.
She leant back on the couch. Maybe grab a snack. Need for sugar.
Shhszzsssssss...
What?
Noise.
What was that?
Tingle dizzy.
Moment of.
Blur.
Something wrong. Something is wrong.
The noise again, quieter now.
...shhzzhsshsss...
She stopped. Held herself still, alert.
The skull hum?
No, not that. This was different.
The screen, maybe?
No, still turned off. Definitely turned off.
So listen. Listen now...
Shhhhhshs.
There.
There it was. Slightly louder now.
Shhhhszss...shszts...sshskjszsss...
Words?
Listen!

No. Not words, not as yet, and not even a whisper. Only a murmuring or a faint hissing sound that seemed to come from a slightly different direction each time she moved her head.

Nola closed her eyes, concentrated.

Was it a voice? Was it somebody speaking?

Sth...sh...ha...t...he...mho...istu...shn...

Somebody trying to speak? A child perhaps? A young boy?

Nola could not tell for sure.

She felt a tingling sensation on her abdomen, which she scratched at without really thinking, her fingers digging in under her

shirt. The skin felt warm and sticky.

What?

Fingers searching, pressing.

What in the hell is that?

She leaned back to lift up the shirt, to examine her stomach more closely. There was something there, on her skin.

Difficult to see.

She stood up and walked into the kitchen, where the overhead strip-light still buzzed.

Now. Now she saw it clearly.

...A bruise.

A bruise on her stomach.

It was purple and pink coloured, lurid against her flesh, roughly circular, about two inches in diameter, situated just to the left of her navel. Nola's fingers explored the area gingerly, almost scared of what she might find. But there seemed to be no puncture, no serious wounding. That slight feel of stickiness, nothing more.

Had she been attacked last night, or even been involved in some kind of fight?

No, not that she could recall.

Could she have forgotten some violent encounter? No. No, it wasn't possible. Maybe she'd fallen over in the street, in a stupor? But what kind of fall would result in a bruise to the stomach? She must have walked into something, that was it, that was the only explanation, stumbled into a door without realising, or a lamppost or a fence, a parked car, something like that.

It was a mystery.

The tingling on the skin could still be felt.

Nola pulled her shirt back down and walked through into the bedroom. She was suddenly tired, exhausted, struggling to remove her clothes, most of them.

Her head fell back against the pillow.

She was soon asleep.

Dreams disturbed her.

Strange visions, bursts of imagery that never settled for more than a couple of seconds. They could not be truly registered, only experienced, only flinched from or welcomed, each in turn. Around these fleeting pictures lay a wash of low-level static that softened the skull, and within which music could be heard.

Somebody singing.

A voice so beautiful, and that melody, that amazing pattern of notes! She'd never heard such music. Really, she had to get up now and write it down, capture it, jot down the words and the melody before they vanished.

But she could not awaken, not properly.

Instead Nola reached out towards the music, towards the singing voice, these human presences, until the dream folded itself back into darkness.

After that she slept soundly for a couple of hours or so, her fingers resting lightly on her stomach the whole time.

Blood flowed back and forth around the web of veins and arteries.

Feeding the bruise.

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-5-

Nola stared into the bathroom mirror.

She was showered and fresh and feeling better. Having checked the bruise again, she was glad to see the colours were fading a little and that any physical sensations had lessened, fading to a mild skinglow.

She moved into the living room, clicked on the screen without thinking, just for the sound of it, the flicker, the company, the chatter of voices.

Szhzfzzttht.

Connections were made.

Her stomach lurched.

Her hands were drawn to the screen as it lighted. The warmth comforted her, the crackle of electrics. And now she could smell fused wiring. Her tongue licked around her mouth, tasting smoke, sparks.

Fingertip sizzle.

Body heat.

Head buzzing with random input.

Szfistt...szifftst...

Not painful. Just this feeling of being fragile,

on edge.

She needed to take something, a pill. Fuel. Something sweet and thrilling to get her through the day. She would ask Christina's advice, yes. When she came round...

Nola sat down on the floor in front of the visionplex and stared at the screen.

She recognised the programme.

The Pleasure Dome.

Scattercast twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Cross channel round-ups on the hour, specials at the weekend, all access available via the grapevine sites, legal or otherwise.

Shimmer now. Colours forming...

The clear plastic of the Dome itself, twenty-one metres in diameter, buried partway into the soil, eighteen meters tall at the apex. Dots of orange and blue traverse the curved surface, slowly mutating into sun and sea, melting from there to a speeding car, a wave of surf, a ruined tower under a twin-moon sky. The outer surface displays constantly changing images, sometimes in abstract patterns, other times forming into semi-

coherent episodes, fragments, glimpses of a narrative.

Early morning Sunlight caresses the Dome like a lover's ghost.

Interior shot: the woman, kneeling in the centre.

The young woman kneeling in soil, with her greasy matted hair and dried out skin, her fingers covered in clay, scabs, dead insects. Torn flowers around her, the remnants of a meal, bones, apple cores, wafer crumbs. A roll of cloth for a bed. Nothing more. The woman's hands, working, knotting, tangling string and wire and twigs together.

The image flickered.

Nola's eyes blinked in time.

The young woman frowned.

Her name was Melissa. Famous Melissa. The chosen one, this year's oracle. Participant. Victim. Call her what you will.

The camera moved closer to the woman's head, showing the tiny marks, one on each temple, where the transmitters had been injected. They glowed red: active signal.

Now her face filling the screen entirely, her eyes...

Melissa's eyes gazing out at Nola.

Staring. Dark. Fierce.

Nola could not turn away, not even for a second.

Cut to: Dome shot. Exterior.

The surface reacted with swirls of red and gold, flickers of blue, flowers, petals, bees landing on stamen to gather pollen, flying away. Shift and slant into pure white, milk white, off white. Crackle of flames. The surface of the Dome danced with imagery, all of it conjured in real time from the woman who sat and slept and prayed and slathered and murmured and howled at the centre, locked inside. From the skullflow, let bloom skullfowers. Fill the screen, move in, bleed. Take us over. Witness now the buzz and crackle of a mind at play, setting flames to a bird's wing, tearing at raw meat, sucking a wound, caressing naked flesh, sweat on a man's back, muscles at work, the sky folded, darkened, the myriad stars in their constellations, all cast for a few seconds in turn on the surface. The images were constantly shifting and merging and separating and fading and dying away to let new images take over.

In this way, the young woman in the Dome gave her thoughts to the world. Whatever she dreamed was immediately made visible, uncensored, direct to the audience.

Direct to Nola.

Jump cut.

Now Melissa's eyes in close-up, yearning.

Nola stared back.

Melissa rubbed the fingers of one hand in dirt and shit. She took up a stick and started to scrawl letters in the soil around her.

D...A...

She hesitated as though remembering an impulse, then moved on.

...D...D...Y...

Nola gazed upon the woman from the safety of her living room, reading the letters as they formed.

DADDY I...

Melissa's hand trembled. The stick pushed and bent against the ground and was now taken up, and stabbed into the bare flesh of her arm, digging.

Blood flow.

Cut. Exterior shot:

The Dome's curved expanse mirrored this moment in slashes of red, in scrits and scrats of noise, a mouth cracking open to moan, to sing demented under a staring moon. Words, tangle, wingbeat. *Dady I ahte you. Daddy I hte yu. Dddy Ih ate u.* Across the Dome they travelled, these words, merging with all the images that flowed there, into fog and fire and rainfall, into maps and tigers and rivers and the dance of headlamps on a night road, the tippy tap of a dancer's feet on a wooden floor, the dancer's ankles bruised and matted with crimson stains, the knees buckling, sequins stripped from her dress and falling in a glitter shower, pollen dust, shimmer time. The spill of skull clutter.

Interior: the woman alone.

Still now. Frozen.

Eyes hooded, half blind, a tickle of fluid from a tear duct in ultra close-up.

And for those few sweet moments Nola was held there by the spectacle, hypnotised. Frozen to the spot herself, in mirror of Melissa: throat tight, hands clammy. Nola had never been so affected before, not by an image, by a mere transmission of a human being. But now she felt the pain of the young woman. Nola *was* the pain. And all viewers around the world, like herself, they too had fallen into the pain of the moment.

And then the image shifted on the screen.

Szixfztst...

Nerve jump.

Nola was saddened. She needed to feel the connection once more.

The image stalled. Fluttered in lines. Found itself.

Nola breathed: 'Come on. That's it.'

There. There it was.

Falter. Twitch. The young woman's face marred by static snow, flickers of noise.

Nola cursed the screen. 'No. Not now. Work for me.'

She edged closer.

Warm glass against skin. She needed this.

Come back to me…

The screen clicked to dark.

Spell broken.

And Nola was shocked to find herself down on her knees, close enough to the glass to feel the afterglow.

Her body felt aroused, alive with a sweet hot buzz. Her hand slipped under her shirt, across her stomach.

The bruise.

Warm there…wet…

The doorbell rang.

Damn.

It was Christina, here to pick her up.

For Your Pleasure...

Imagine a sphere. Imagine a garden that grows on the surface of a sphere, the flowers moving freely, blossoming and dying, blossoming again in high-speed motion, their petals changing colour in a shifting array of patterns.

Imagine now that each flower is seeded from within, from inside the Dome. Imagine these flowers changing one by one into insects, these insects changing en mass into swirls of mist, into doorways opening and closing, into a red sun setting over a housing estate, into stars.

A woman lives inside the Dome. Her temples glow softly red. Sparks float from her eyes, from her hair, her brow, from her fingertips. Each spark a thought, a feeling, a seed. An image. Many images...

From this vision the Pleasure Dome was born.

The Dome's surface is constructed from polyhobarium, a layered material whose sensitive pigments pick up signals from brainwaves, transforming them into patterns and colours and shapes. This exopsychic transferral process was developed by Hobart Projections, a UK-based company. The process allows the inner mind to be revealed or at least envisioned in material form.

Some call it a hoax, saying that the Dome randomly produces images. Nevertheless, the concept has certainly captured the public's attention, most prominently in the popular cross-media programme in which a volunteer is sealed inside a polyhobarium dome for weeks on end, living in the most basic conditions as their thoughts and emotions and dreams are witnessed by millions of viewers around the world.

Fear, lust, memories, dark twisted visions, drifting patterns of abstract design: all are captured on the exterior screen of the Pleasure Dome. Nightmares. Innermost secrets. Idle ruminations. All revealed. It takes therefore a certain kind of person to submit to the Dome's hunger. Psychologists have warned of the obvious potential for serious mental disturbance.

A number of teething problems plagued the early years of development. At least two subjects fell into comas, held in suspension for a period of three to four weeks. They recovered fully, waking of their own accord in their hospital beds, with no coherent memories of their trance state. Only whispers, fragments, glimpsed images of landscapes, bodies floating in darkness, people of shadow. The subjects' brows were marked with charcoal, their fingertips with blood. Blood not their own. However, all such problems are now solved. There have been no incidents for many years now. The programme continues.

A poet wrote: Let flowers spring from the skull, that we may see them and be revived. The Pleasure Dome allows such a process, such blossoming. Pleasures await.

-7-

The day's activities began. The new single had to be promoted. Here was daily life as Nola Blue lived it, this sacred opportunity she had worked for, a prize that thousands would wish upon themselves.

Interviews, photo shoots, radio appearances.

At no time did George Gold turn up, not even to push his head round a doorway and say hello.

Christina stayed loyal.

She slipped Nola a little something in tablet form. 'Here we are. This will reinforce all your self-belief systems, believe me.' Now they drank tea together, overstewed studio beverage laced with a whiskey shot. They laughed at blue jokes and whispered gossip of rival stars. Christina was ten years older than Nola. She was an old-school fleshhappy pop theorist with a sideline in drugs and radical mindfuck, who told stories of all the girl and guy fans she had stolen from Nola over the last year, just for a night's pleasure. And she smiled so brightly and nodded right on cue and held Nola's hand for good luck. But the other professionals they met along the way - reporters, marketing people, photographers and the like - they were treating Nola differently, as though she were already used-up goods. But Nola did her best, at times even better than that, feeling the old passion coming back, all beatlust, swagger and kudos. No doubt, the pill working. But more than that. Nola was buzzing on her own dream. And all went well until she had to record a filmed performance of the song, to be broadcast later that week on *Love is Cheap*, a teenage lifestyle programme.

Mime show. The usual.

Nola shook her head. 'Chris, tell them. I want to sing it live.'

'They're all set up.'

'Tell them.'

Christina's eyes turned dark. 'You do want they want. That's the deal.'

Yes. The deal. Sponsorship. Packaging. So many units shipped, such and such a revenue.

And...smile.

Lips moving to the playback.

(wanna, wanna)

Music in the earphones.

(I just wanna)

Mouth and body operating in sync, no problems, but then a bulb clicked out overhead, and suddenly Nola saw herself from up there, from the lighting rig above.

Life playing at a distance, herself some creature of cloth and powder, hardly there at all. Pierced by the follow spot: red-shaded, green, then yellow, bright and burning.

Inane steps of the choreography, supposed to make her look good or sexy or saleable or something.

Hot skin, prickles of sweat under her clothes.

You know I wanna,

I wanna get to know you.

But now she couldn't make the lyric/mouth relationship work properly, not at all. Her lips moved ahead of the playback, and then dragged back, too slowly. Take after take had to be made, until finally the director was shouting at her. He was making it worse.

Skip, stumble. Knock of her shoes on wood.

Words coming out in a rush:

I wanna (I just wanna) really want to get to know the real you.

All. All of you. Let me through.

I just wanna touch you, you, just (wanna) touch you.

The real you, I just wanna

Follow you down and cover you.

(Please) let me touch you.

I just wanna

I just…

Nola's mouth refused to obey her. Other words came into her head, taking over, spewing forth: evil words, obscene words. She had to clamp her lips shut to stop the new lyrics from being heard. Her body jerked and twitched through the dance routine like a half-broken marionette. She felt no real connection to the actual song as music, as melody or meaning, but only as a series of specially coded phrases and gestures, designed to trigger the appropriate emotional or physical buttons in the chosen demographic subclass.

Wanna…wanna…get to…

wanna….get…close to…feel…you…

let me…all of…

wanna wanna…

Words split and slithering, music throbbing in her ears like some internal blood song.

Flashes of light, just off-vision.

'People, I'm getting some kind of interference,' said the director from the control room. 'What is that, please?'

Monitor flood, feedback squall.

Nola's stomach started first to itch,

and then to burn.

Her eyes closed shut, tight.

Sliding away. Slipping loose. Music fading to a faraway crackle, pure static, heat sparks. Pain. A voice speaking to her, whispering close. But what was being said?

She couldn't hear it properly.

What was being told to her? Some kind of information, or a story.

How could she ever know?

Talk to me. Talk to me! Louder!

In reply came only whispering breath.

What are you saying to me?

And then Christina took hold of her by the shoulders and led her away to the edge of the sound stage, asking if she was alright. Nola could barely answer. She folded her arms around herself, covering, cowering, suddenly embarrassed by her own body.

Christina asked again.

Nola pulled away. 'I need some time. A few minutes.'

'Sure. Sure, you do that.'

Nola nodded, smiled.

Thank you.

She left the studio space, making her way to the washrooms down the corridor. The walls went hazy in her sight and she slipped and almost fell. Her stomach heaved. Sounds rushed in her ears, creating fuzz, residue. Dust on her tongue, metal spice. A weird flavour. Finally she made it to the Ladies where she managed to stagger into one of the cubicles, just before throwing up, a rich vomit spatter on the white tiles.

'Jesus. What is wrong with me?'

And still her stomach ached, stabbing.

Hands coming up. Shirt, fumbled at,

yanked aside.

(ughhh)

(hardly daring to look...)

The bruise.

(there...shit...uh...no...)

The bruise had grown worse.

Where before it was stained with pink and purple, now it was multicoloured, the original colours dissolving into many other shades, reds and yellows and a few daubs of orange. It was still roughly circular in shape, looking to be more than three inches across, obscuring Nola's navel.

It was spreading.

The weird voices continued within her hearing. Were they

coming from inside her head, or from the world outside?

One voice grew prominent.

Nola could make out a few words here and there, amid drop-outs and static:

...Every night...the enemy make inroads...our boys do their very best...a sudden attack...

Her fingers touched at her abdomen, pressing.

Warm flesh, dampness.

She bent over to examine the bruise in more detail. Was it moving? Was it moving under her touch, or more bizarrely, moving with a life of its own?

Sudden surge of pain, deep inside.

Fuck. Shit.

Nola moved in panic. She banged the cubicle door back against the cubicle wall, rushed over to the mirror above the row of sinks.

Shirt pulled wide open.

Buttons slipping free. One, two.

Her body pressed itself as close to the glass as she could manage.

There now. There it was.

It moved again.

The bruise was alive.

Alive...

It moved in psychedelic patterns, the colours shifting and melting one into the other. Now they swirled, now they broke apart and reformed, moving as one, ever-changing. Nola touched at the surface, tenderly, in fear. Her fingers came back sticky and hot. She watched enthralled as the movements of the strange contusion slowed at last, coalesced, taking on a definite shape. Nola stepped back a little from the glass, to better make out the effect.

It was a

It was...

It was a mouth.

Lips. Tongue. Teeth. Gums. Saliva...

The image of a mouth.

A perfectly formed if slightly oversized human mouth that occupied more or less the entire area of the bruise. The thin red lips opened and closed. The burred tongue was licking wet, tapping at the teeth and roof, forming syllables. And the voice that now played in Nola's head seemed to be moving in time with the lips.

A man was speaking aloud from Nola's stomach.

The latest figures show plainly that support is falling amongst the middle classes...

Nola grabbed at the nearest sink for support. Her fingers tried to dig into the porcelain. Her own mouth opened to scream, or to cry out

at least, but nothing would come from her, no sound, no release. Only the stomach wound continuing, another voice now, another pair of lips, those of a woman.

Nola recognised the sound.

It was Dolly Temple, the blowsy slattern of *Square Peg Avenue*. Dolly Temple, the Queen of Daytime Soap, ranting, spitting words from her pink polished lips.

You. Get. Out. Now. Leave. I detest your kind.

Dolly hissed and steamed.

Never. Do you hear me? Never again will I sleep with you!

Nola groaned. She held herself. She clamped her hands, both hands over her stomach, to hold the images inside, to keep the noise from escaping.

It was no good.

The white tiled surfaces throbbed with splashes of livid colour as her eyes opened and closed.

'Nola? Are you in here? Nola?'

Christina's voice. Footsteps.

Nola panicked. She rushed back into the cubicle.

I can't let people see me, not like this.

It was too late. Christina banged a fist against the door, calling her name.

Stay away!

The door swung open.

Christina stared at her. 'We were wondering where you'd got to.'

Nola pulled at her shirt, holding the two halves closed with her fist. 'I...I...I'm busy.' Her voice stuttered. She managed to get a button fastened.

'Right. I can see that.' Christina looked at her. Cold. Cold eyes. 'It's just that the video crew are getting worried, with the time and all that, the costs.'

Nola came out of the cubicle. She said, 'I'm not feeling too good.'

Christina nodded. 'If I had your chance...do you think I'd be like this? Hell no. I'd be singing and dancing like a cheap wind-up robot, all day and all of the night. Now get out there and perform.'

Nola made no answer, could not even keep her eyes fixed on any one subject.

Christina changed tack. She pulled down a length of paper towelling, wetted it in the sink, and went to dab at Nola's damp face.

'There now. We'll get you better. We'll make this work.'

Nola could hardly bear it.

Close. Too close.

Sweat. Heat. The smell of another person.

'Here now. Come on. Nola, have some water.'

Nola drank.

Sudden cold rush of liquid down her throat, grateful, like she hadn't drunk in weeks.

'I can't do it, Chris. Not today.'

The two women stared at each other.

'Okay. But what should I say to them? Any ideas?'

'I'm sorry. Not today.'

Christina's face filled with trouble. 'Sweet Jesus, but we really do need to get you sorted out.'

'What?'

'Get you some release, a good fuck, a week in a private spa, or a shot of juice to the veins, what do you say?'

Nola's anger burned at this. Sudden, loud: 'Get the fuck away from me.'

Silence. Christina clenched a fist. She breathed in steady, breathed out, tried to keep control.

Nola said, 'Ring George.'

'George?'

'He looks out for me.'

Christina laughed. 'Really? You believe that? Nola, he made you. He created you from dust, from a single spark.'

'It's not like that. We're equal.'

'Equal?'

Nola's eyes going wild. 'I'm the talent.'

'Of course you are.'

Suddenly fired up: 'He's not my creator.'

'Fine. Is this the pill going wrong?'

Nola shook her head. Her body trembled with desire.

'You're sure now? Nothing on top of that? No prescription drugs we don't know about.'

'No.'

Desire? Why desire? And desire for what exactly? Nola was liquid inside, skin glowing in painful pleasure.

She swayed from side to side.

Christina just stared at her. Seeing only another fuck-job, another mess to clean up. She spoke slowly, keeping eye contact. 'I've looked after worse than you, Nola. Really. The absolute dregs. Tuneless bitches, male tarts, sensitive deary-me artistes, abject cowards singing anti-war anthems, gleeful desperate little upstarts with eyeballs full of dreams and lips still damp from Mama's tit. All that wailing in the wings, the shits, the jitters. Stage fright, spotlight rash, limo sickness, red-carpet panic attacks. I've covered up zits, drunkenness, pregnancies, abortions, punch-ups, shoplifting, the whole rigmarole. I have secret knowledge of the stars. And you know what? I'll outlast

them all.' Christina grinned. 'And here's me thinking, finally, thank God, somebody different, somebody with a bit of fire in them.'

Nola looked at her and nodded.

Christina reached out. 'So now: you play the game. Please do that.' Her voice was close, warm. 'That's all. That's all we ask of you, little star. Play to win. Because you know what the very lovely and very rich and ever so talented Miss Yoni Yoni cried out, don't you, her last words before leaping to the tarmac, seven full storeys below?'

Nola shook her head.

'Fuck the Noise.'

Christina's words shivered in light.

'You want to end up like her?'

Mist. Sparkle.

And all that Nola could hear now was the voice inside, this time a child's voice in her head, crying out for a cake or a toy, *Gimme, gimme, gimme!* and then laughing with sudden burbles of joy.

Couldn't Christina hear this? She *must* hear it.

Was Nola the only one?

Her face in the mirror.

Eyes: fearful, black, they would not look back at her.

She turned away. Again, her stomach heaved, she was going to be sick.

Christina a figure of blur, miles away, miles.

White porcelain glimmer, overbright.

Strip-light fizzle and spark.

Burn of wiring.

One man's voice.

Facts and figures. Skintalk. Chatter.

The average turnover will fall, as...

Jabbering. He would not stop.

Of course, as predicted...

A woman's voice, interrupting.

Babble.

Voices. Louder now. Voices that sang and blustered and yelled out and sighed, nonstop.

Noise. A kiss. Two pairs of lips meeting, the sound caught and magnified.

Wet suck.

Pain in Nola's skull.

Sharp.

Throb.

Needle sharp.

Then darkness.

-8-

She caught a taxi outside the studio.

Alone now, having left Christina to sort out the mess. Thankfully, the strange voices had died down to a whisper, sometimes even fading to silence, but she could still feel her abdomen burning. A sudden feeling of nausea would every so often possess her.

Reaching her apartment she immediately headed for the bathroom, where she pulled off her shirt to examine her body in the full length mirror.

Eyes wide open now, needing to know...

The bruise.

The damaged area had grown still further, covering almost half of her belly. The surface was wet. Seepage. Pus. Moving images played there, flickering into existence and then changing, transmuting into other shapes and scenes in a constant flow.

Nola saw:

The crescent moon.

Clouds.

Pictures of far-off lands.

Soldiers marching.

A lingering shot of a half-naked man.

Blood on a wall.

Graffiti: *Free the Dream!*

A cat prowling.

A building in flames.

Each image was accompanied by a sound or a series of noises:

Cheers, shouts, inane chatter.

Car brakes screaming, fists slamming into soft flesh.

A gunshot, a baby's first tears.

Political commentary.

A raging argument.

Groans of simulated pleasure, cries of despair.

Static interference, each wave bringing Nola a jolt of pain.

Szzzxtzztztxt!

Jingles, riddles, tangles of words.

Popular songs of decades past, war whoops, poems of love and loneliness.

Footsteps

footsteps

footsteps

on a dark and rainy boulevard.

All of these things were brought to extraordinary life on Nola's skin, and she could not drag her eyes away from them.

Oh God, what's happening to me?

What's happening?

Alas, alas the looking glass

had no voice, no lips, no tongue

with which to speak.

Nola wet her hands at the sink and started to wash herself, her stomach, the bruise itself, rubbing, rubbing at the strange contusion, wiping, trying to clean herself of this mark, this damage.

The bruise remained.

She hurried into the main room, crying out to the walls, the visionplex, the furniture, the window, crying out for help, for anything, just some grain of hope or comfort.

There was none.

She rang Christina.

'What is it, Nola? What the fuck is going on? You have to tell me.'

'Just come over.'

'Now?'

'If you can. Please.'

That was all she could manage. She clicked off the bug, poured herself a drink, and waited.

The blank wall screen held her in its vision, reflected, a pale dream of a woman clinging to the last shreds by her teeth and nails.

She drank. Her eyes closed.

Pictures came to her, dreamlike.

Stop. Please stop.

Pictures. Stories told in mist, in fragments:

A tall tower struck by lightning.

Night falling across moorland, where a strange animal drags itself through the grass. The beast has a wounded side, and seeps blood. The blood is succour to crawling bugs.

She knew these images were currently flashing across her stomach. She felt them there, but she would not look at them, no, let them flow away, let them die, let all images die.

The last man alive on the planet walks down a deserted high street. The air is humid, muggy with heat. The man's scrawny greyblack shadow follows at a distance, separated from his body.

A crashed spaceship in the centre of London. The people run in fear.

Images stolen from cable vision, from fantasy and horror films,

science fiction.

From the all-day-long reality channels.

A middle-aged woman stares at her own face in a mirror. She speaks, the signal broken by noise, by fever and dust. 'I feel dirty, filthy... all these cameras...all day...all night...so many eyes...touching me...touching...

Christina got there within half an hour. She could hardly believe what she was seeing.

Nola: slumped down against the wall, face hidden, hair wet and out of shape. Her shirt was torn, hanging loosely open. There was an empty whiskey glass on the carpet at her side.

Christina bent down, pulling Nola to a sitting position. 'Come on, baby. Easy now.'

Nola tried to hold her shirt closed, but Christina had already seen that something was wrong down there, within the folds, on the skin.

Was that an injury, a wound of some kind?

Quietly spoken: 'Let me have a look.'

And gently she pulled Nola's shirt open fully, viewing the bruise that lay beneath, a sickening bright stain of colour stretching across Nola's stomach.

'Oh my God, Nola. Who did this to you?'

Silence.

'How did this happen? Did somebody hit you?'

Nola shook her head.

'Well. You didn't do this yourself?'

Again, no answer. But then Nola struggled to her feet, saying, 'Look at me, Chris. Look closely.' She breathed deep, steadying herself. 'Tell me what you see.'

Christina looked at the bruise.

The colours and the extent of it were painful to the eye. At first all she could was the wound itself. But soon enough the contusion altered itself, the shapes and patterns taking on new form. Sounds could be heard, all quiet as yet, but gathering. And then a voice coming from the skin itself, and an answering voice, faraway, muffled.

Christina closed her eyes.

She remembered her own time on television, the primitive version, her one great chance at success. She felt again the camera's heat, the fizzle and burn of skin. Sweat beads. Nerves jumping. She recalled the thought of her own image being transmitted, examined, sent around the nation, found wanting. The long minutes stretching out, her face melting, it seemed like, under the harsh lights, every pore and blemish magnified, her sins on show, revealed, the body opened out for public viewing. All the people she had slept with over the years, the grabbing of pleasure wherever it might lie, moment to moment. No George Gold in her life, back then. Alone. So much

booze, so many drugs. Add it all up, weigh the balance. The lights catching her, x-raying her soul. So bad, so very bad. The camera moving in, closer. Breath caught in her throat. Panic. One hand tapping at her tiny crucifix necklace, the other shaking at the script. Dig in, keep reading. Glue this mother down. Say your lines. Keep...

Take that fucking machine off me. Turn it away!

She came off set jittering, soaked. Never again. *Never.*

She had been reading the local news, small-time cable. That's all. Flower shows and minor flood warnings. Viewing figures in the low hundreds.

But now. That same panic.

Christina felt faint.

The room *tilted*.

Nola asked, 'Do you see it? Do you?'

She looked up at the singer's troubled face and then back down to the belly.

The bruise was glowing, casting a charm.

Christina saw faces, eyes filled with need, mouths moving in silent prayer.

Now the tiny image of a village, the streets filled with worshippers. They were carrying an effigy of the Virgin Mary through the twisting lanes. A windy day, the breeze catching at the statue. Somebody stumbled, one of the carriers.

Our Lady of Blood and Shadows fell.

The crowd gasped, a collective breath held in silence, and then let loose, released in tears. People on their knees, begging for forgiveness in Spanish, hands clasped before them in supplication, murmuring as one.

Christina turned to catch the words. No, she would have to get closer.

'I won't...' she said. Hesitated. 'I won't, you know, catch anything from you, will I? Nola? I mean, it's not contagious?'

'I don't know. I really don't know.'

Christina took a breath and then pressed her ear directly against the warm, wet stomach.

Nola's body reacted to the human presence, the closeness. Her skin tingled. Strangely, she felt comforted. It was good to be giving pleasure in this way, to be sending out signals, and to have those signals received and understood. She became a giving object. A subject to be viewed. Here was solace, of a kind.

The voices spoke to Christina:

Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.

The effect was soothing, lulling, only for the mood to be broken

as another sound cut in. People cheering, and booing. Christina stood up. Mouth open, eyes wide. Fear written there on the face.

A miniature football match was being played out on Nola's stomach.

...and now with only seven minutes of normal play left, what possible magic can United pull from their red-and-white bag of tricks...

Christina took a few steps backwards without thinking, away from the vision, the terrible sight.

Nola watched her retreating, and she wanted to speak out, to cry out: *No, please Christina. Don't be scared of me!* But she could not, she could only remain silent, and watch the shocked expression of her personal assistant. Knowing then that Christina was repulsed by what she had seen on the body.

Nola spoke gently. 'Turn on the visionplex. Go on.'

Christina did so.

'Now flick through the channels.'

The screen buzzed with images and sounds.

Click, fzipp, this morning, spak, pppop, crackle, get away, shoosh, for ever, karroom, sxzxktt.

'Something's wrong, Nola. The reception's terrible.'

'Keep going.'

Fragments jumped and jarred.

Until finally Christina stopped her searching. Now she looked from the screen to Nola's body and back again. The same image of the same dying minutes of the same football match was there on the screen of glass, exactly as the game appeared on the skin. In synch, real time. Moment by moment, kick by kick and pass by pass. The ball slamming into the back of the net on both objects simultaneously, machine and flesh.

Goal!!!

Christina zapped onwards, finding the same Spanish village as before, the same worshippers. The statue had been lifted up once more, the procession continuing on its way.

'Do you see now, Christina?' Nola's face had taken on blood, life, energy. 'My body has become a receiver of some kind. An aerial. I'm picking up signals as they move through the air. Media waves. Pictures. Sound.'

Christina saw this as the point and edge of madness, and yet the physical sight of the screen of skin burned its way into her eyes. There. There was proof.

'You need help, Nola,' she said. 'Let me help you.'

Nola stared ahead. Body shaking now.

Christina closed her eyes and waited for some light to click on.

No light clicked on.

Eyes opening to the same scene, the same Nola, the same woman with her stomach glowing with pictures. ‘I don't know what this is,’ she said. ‘I’m never seen anything like it, not ever. But we can do something. You have to go to a doctor, to the hospital.’

Nola shook her head. ‘But the press will find out. They’ll treat me like a specimen. I’ll be on the specialised freak-body channels.’

Christina moved closer. She looked genuinely concerned. ‘Really...you need to do this. We need to look after you.’

Silence.

Until Nola nodded, sadly. ‘Yes. Hospital. Okay.’

‘I’ll call an ambulance.’

‘No. We can take my car.’

‘You can’t drive, Nola. Not like this.’

‘You take me then.’

‘Fine. That’s good.’

‘I’ll get ready.’

Nola was moving slowly. Barely understood instructions were being sent to her body from some vague dislocated part of her brain.

She walked into the hallway, heading for the bedroom.

Christina tidied up a little, waiting for Nola to come back out. The wall screen glowed with transmitted life, with a gathering of people. A church bell sounded.

Christina felt faint. The room rang with lost spells, with blue echo ghosts.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou among women...

After a few minutes she called out. ‘Nola? Are you ready yet?’

There was no reply.

Christina walked to the doorway, looking through.

The bedroom was empty.

-9-

Out on the roads where the neon glides, sparkling, where the glass walls glow golden with the falling sun.

Nola driving.

Her vehicle is sleek and blue and shiny and finely tuned, a present from George for her second number one hit.

Nola travelling through the city of fire and shadows, along roads of glitter-dust, through the ether paths, through the airwaves, through haze and crackle.

Nola, picking up broadcasts.

Surrounded by words, flashes of heat, of noise, fuzz and flicker. All broken, all scattered, fragments of meaning. Feeling the signals as they danced, feeling her skin respond, to burn and itch.

Traffic reports, blips of info, rolling news, pirate radio callouts, shrieks and moans.

The latest hits, the fallen songs.

Skull traffic.

Nola in pain. Her one desire now, to escape, to outrun the feelings, the charge that was taking her body over, that threatened her.

Hands slipping on the steering wheel, wet with sweat.

Her whole body alive with buzz and static.

Bad reception. Loose connections.

Szzstzt...szsztztz...

Now. Come on. Concentrate.

Slow down.

Szzxxztsts...

A red light.

Stop.

Nola reached over with one hand to scratch at the palm of the other, where it rested on the wheel trim. Her fingers pushed at skin, at softly giving flesh.

Her head throbbed with noise.

Szzzxtxzttztzzzzzsztz...

Lights: green.

She drove on a little way until the road ahead blurred to a mist and she had to pull over to the curb. The engine ticked quietly like a clockwork animal.

Slowly Nola turned her hand over, the right hand, and looked at the palm.

A second bruise glowed there: tiny as yet, purple, violet.

And a young man's face stared out from the centre of her hand, from the bruise, conjured into being. He sang, he whispered, he pleaded, he sobbed. Interference patterns cut through his message.

Let us partake...szxsxt...

Destroy the nightly fix...

Take over...

Nola's eyes closed. She tried to shut out the sound, the words. It was no good. They travelled through her. Clouds of static embraced her completely.

She rubbed at her hand, to scour away the picture.

Fever burn of signal.

Her teeth against her lips, piercing.

Blood, the taste of.

Burnt metal.

(...No! Please. No...)

Fingernails digging at her palm.

Nola. Nola Blue. Her own voice rising up from her lungs, her throat, her tongue, bursting free, leaving words behind.

Only noise, only the scream of her own pain. Her body crying out. Crying.

Crying down to silence.

Without heed, soft in the dusk, the young man on Nola's skin spoke on...

Let us partake.

Destroy the nightly fix.

Take over.

Subvert all adverts, merge in colours.

Give voice, make our own distractions.

Let us dream.

Electric dreams, perfumed dreams.

Adrift, we live in the sparks of static, at one with screen and wires, burning with moonfever.

Calling all parasites, all voodoo junkies

all media hackers, culture jammers

all Renegades of Noise:

Forever and ever, all the way down the wavelengths, cable to cable, from the farthest orbit of the satellites, all the way down to Planet Earth,

Splice the signal flow.

Beyond the one million channels, let us travel.

Remix the networks.

Fill our skulls with sound, with vision

Broadcast the feelings
And give reflection, image, completion.
Tune our souls in.
Give me transmission!

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-11-

Introducing George Gold.

Georgie Boy.

The Man himself, incorporated.

He was drawn and dissected in the press as the number one Expressionistic Purloiner of Young Musical Talent and corrupter thereof, and yet he himself claimed that his heart beat louder for his protégés than for himself.

A few believed him; most did not.

He was called a master encoder of secret messages both above and below the dotted line, but his deals made money for all concerned even if the perks and fractions were sliced in his direction.

George was a self-made man, the type who was more than happy to give out his drop-of-a-hat biog: ex guitar player, ex boxer, ex bookie, ex menswear catalogue model, one-time magician on the chicken and chips circuit. Rumours of being a bondage addict. Speech sample: 'I spent two years in the fucking nick for assuming a false identity in order to obtain monies, and I've never looked back. Fuck no. I'm still doing it. Still wearing a mask.'

Self-styled survivor of the one thousand knocks, the false and true accusations, the weekend press smear-jobs.

Proud recipient of the Order of the British Empire, for services to Music and the Arts.

Brought up the youngest of five, absent father, mother barely there in any kind of mental or spiritual capacity. George dragged himself along by his own two claws, sharpened on the grindstone. Formed his first band at the age of fifteen and has never since walked down any normal pathway. His soul is honed and toned, even now when his body is heading for flab. In his own words: 'I'm goaded and punished by the twin sisters of music and money, lovely evil sluts the both of them.'

Secretly, he's urged on only by his fear of falling, of tumbling back down to where he came from.

George was now fifty-seven years old, twice divorced, with only one child, a grown-up daughter. He loved the music his company put out, loved it dearly, but more than anything he wanted to make one great record, a swaggering heaven-scented blood-sugaring three minute teenage symphony he could be truly proud of, something of

value. This desire however would remain secret, unfulfilled.

Profession stated on passport: Impresario.

In his heart: Culture Pirate.

Votes: Conservative.

Thinks: old-school Socialist.

George Gold owned at least five residences dotted around the planet. His main London place was a mews cottage on the edge of Hampstead Heath. Here he sits. His personal secretary has been dismissed, the study lights are turned low, the whisky is poured.

He's alone.

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It was seven o'clock, time for his nightly witness.

George turned on the visionplex. The pictures fluttered into view.

There it was.

The Pleasure Dome.

He gazed at the screen for a while, at the circular ring fence, the silent crowds. The semi-spherical structure itself with its constantly changing display of thoughts and feelings.

His eyes lost focus.

Hands tapping at the armrest. Mouth dry.

He could resist no longer.

His fingers pressed on the remote control, changing the camera view.

Now he was gazing into the Dome, inside, at the figure who crouched there, the woman.

Closer.

Tap, tap...

On the zoom.

The woman's face covered in mud, twigs in her hair.

Her filthy hands scrabbling for a bone to chew on.

George felt his eyes dampen at the sight.

Melissa...

Melissa, my child. My only one.

Melissa.

The woman in the Dome started to howl.

The crowd at the fence watched in silence, so many haunted creatures standing in a forest clearing.

Moonflicker. Cloudpass.

Images cascading over the surface of the Dome.

In the crowd, a murmuring of breath, whispers. A word or two barely spoken. Nothing more.

The fans stood in their ranks, all in line, curve upon curve, all
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staring ahead. Hoping for a sign, a sliver of understanding, the secret of the universe to be given to them. Here, at the centre of mediated life, their one desire...to glimpse the mathematics behind the code.

A message.

Melissa. Melissa Gold speak to us now. Show us your thoughts. Give us pictures. Give us sustenance, that we may live on, beyond the programme, beyond captivation.

This is all they wanted.

Life itself. As they could never live it themselves.

George watched the screen.

He saw the faint lamp-red glow at Melissa's temples, as the implanted transmission devices sent their message to the domeskin. He watched her face set in concentration. He looked on as she twisted bits of stick and string and stones into some kind of elaborate machinery of her own devising. He viewed his beloved lost daughter as she tugged at her own hair, pulling, using the torn strands to bind the various parts of the device together.

Now she looked up, into a roving camera's eye.

Her mouth was moving.

Hidden microphones opened themselves wide to capture and magnify the voice.

I was never like the rest of them.

Melissa spoke.

Never like the famous ones. Can't you see that, Daddy? I could never be what you wanted. I could never be good enough, not really. I needed to find a way out, a means of escape.

Melissa's face filled the screen.

George stared at her.

Those lips, those eyes. The cheekbones. The tiny crinkles below each tear duct. The words written in dirt on her arms. Such terrible words.

He leaned in even closer, his fingers pressing at the screen.

Touch me...touch me.

Lines of interference cut through the image.

George felt his heart tighten. If he could only stretch forward a hand, to caress that skin, that lovely skin, real or unreal. All then would be well.

Yes, surely, all would then be well...

A noise disturbed him.

A buzzing sound, alien, faraway.

His eyes closed, opened again. The spell was broken and only now could he turn away from the screen. He felt immediately at a loss. The world seemed to have less weight, less substance.

The buzzer continued.

It was one of the guards, calling up from the gate saying that Nola Blue was here, demanding to be let in. George gave his assent. The visit was expected.

He poured himself another shot of 12 year old malt.

Nola entered the room quietly.

George barely glanced at her, saying: 'Here she is, my favourite. My Nola. My little goldmine.' He spoke without inflection, stating facts. 'Look at this.' He gestured towards the screen, which was still tuned into the Dome.

Static half-clouded the screen.

'The signal's getting fucked up good and nasty.'

Nola watched the programme. One of the attendants was passing food into the Dome.

'I don't know how Melissa does this,' she said.

This brought a sideways glance from George.

'I know, I know,' he said. 'Poor sweet thing, she's been in there for months now. No wonder she's all confused.'

'Months?'

He nodded.

'George, it's been three weeks. That's all. Three weeks. You just think it's more than that.'

He screwed his lips up tight. 'You don't get this, do you, Nola? You just don't get it.'

'I guess not.'

'She's trying to make something of herself, that's all. She's tired of Daddy always being there for her, always looking after her, always being this giant iconic monster standing in her path, blocking the way.'

'I can understand that,' Nola said.

George looked at her properly for the first time. 'That's what she called me once, can you believe it? A huge fucking iconic Monster. Me! Finicky little Georgie Boy. I mean, come on!'

Nola ignored him. She ran a finger along a record shelf.

He watched her, asking, 'Why are you wearing gloves?'

'It's the new thing. Everybody's doing it.'

'What? The latest fashion, is it? Did one of our image advisors give them to you?'

'If you like.'

'What are they, driving gloves? That's ridiculous. Take them off.'

Nola smiled. Row after row of old record sleeves were stacked in strict chronological order, music from all the centuries since the printed score began, up to and including the latest young hip thing. Spines cracked, many covers dirty and torn and scrawled upon. Not exhibits: music to be played, to be used. Day after day.

George shook his head. ‘Children are put upon this earth to torment us, most surely,’ He turned back to the screen. His daughter was reaching up to grab at the scraps of food the attendant was handing her through the portal. George continued: ‘They mess you up and they break you down and leave you stranded. And you know what? They enjoy doing so.’

Nola picked up a glossy magazine from a coffee table. She flipped through the pages.

George look quizzical. ‘Weeks, you say? Not months?’

‘Three weeks and two days.’

‘You’ve been watching?’

‘Oh, more than that.’

‘What?’

Nola shrugged.

George glanced at her. ‘Melissa is acting weird, don't you think?’

‘It’s always weird. That’s the nature of the Dome.’

‘Yes, but not like this. Not this bad. I mean…she’s practically an animal.’ George shook his head. ‘It’s disgusting. Really.’

‘She’s getting close.’

‘Close?’

‘To the truth.’

George looked at Nola. ‘What is that supposed to mean?’

Nola smiled. ‘The occupant needs to be isolated, stripped of basic human values. Only then is the mind truly alive to the moment by moment flow of images.’

‘Oh. You think?’

‘Truth is not born from beauty. It’s born from dirt.’

George waved his hand at this. ‘What is that? Poetry or something? I don’t know what you mean, Nola. You’re not making sense.’

She nodded and grinned and watched him for a while. Her manager sat there, bathed in blue screen light, his face glowing sad at the sights on view.

Nola spoke with kindness. ‘It’s not her. It’s not really her, you do know that. It’s not Melissa. It’s just her image.’

George shook his head at this. His eyes were lost and clouded. His yellow-stained fingers wavered over the buttons on the remote. ‘There’s a difference?’ he asked.

Nola looked at him. ‘George…you really think you created me, don’t you?’

He stared at her: ‘I did.’

The words lay between them.

‘I was always in denial of that,’ Nola said. ‘I had so many…dreams…that I thought they had to be mine and mine alone.

They didn't belong to you.'

'I allowed you to dream.'

Nola smiled.

'No more.'

She felt cold at saying this, almost as though she had betrayed him, abandoned her mentor to loneliness.

George shook his head. 'I don't know what you're saying.'

'Your days are passing.'

'Why are you being like this?'

She found a magazine article about herself. The photographs had been digitally mutated, excised of every human flaw.

'Maybe I should try that one time.'

'What?'

'Covering myself in mud, in shit. Tearing my hair out, eating barely cooked meat on live scattercast.'

George frowned at her. He took her in, head to foot, saying: 'You're not looking too well, pumpkin.'

'Look at this, George.' She brandished the magazine, the layout. 'I look like a doll, a great big grown-up plastic dolly.'

'Nola?'

'If I took up a knife, right this moment...if I should cut myself, slice myself open, what would happen? I'd collapse. No blood. Just the air escaping from me. I'd vanish.'

'You're not still worried about the single, are you?'

Nola shook her head. She made a noise, a drawn breath. The magazine fell from her hands.

George asked: 'What have you been doing with yourself?'

'Driving. Just driving around.'

'On your own?'

A shrug. Nola pulled her overcoat tighter around her body.

'And the same last night?' George continued. 'Am I right? You know success is fine from a distance, Nola, but up close it breeds jealousy. You have to be careful out there.'

'So you say.'

'They can turn nasty.'

'They?'

'The punters. They might see you in the wrong light, and come over all Roman Empire on you. It happens, believe me. They might well tear that lovely body of yours to shreds.'

'That might be welcomed.'

George sighed. 'It's not over yet, my dear.'

'What isn't?'

'Your career. Not yet. Not quite yet.'

Nola kept silent on this.

‘Oh fuck. There it goes again.’ This from George as he stood up and walked over to the screen. ‘Should I celebrate this, or curse it?’ He jabbed at the remote, but it was no good; the image was flickering, black to white, black to white to black. The sole inhabitant of the Dome was seen only in the moments between darkness. George cursed. ‘Too much god-awful stupid interference. Electric storms in the ionosphere. Too many satellites up there, the signals cross over each other. And not only that, the bloody moon’s slipping out of orbit, now. I read that, online.’

‘You believe these things?’

‘Some such.’

He pressed at the remote, bringing up scenes from other cameras, finding one that remained stable. It patrolled the area around the Dome.

‘Look at them all, Nola. All drawn by some kind of force-beam or something, some twisted-up desire. It’s the central node, you see, where the Nation’s desires gather. And what are they doing? They’re not chanting anymore, they’re not screaming and clapping and all the usual stuff, no, they’re just standing there in some kind of media trance.’

Nola moved closer to the visionplex.

She felt her own body warming up, the nearer she got,

bursts of electrical energy

travelling her brain and nervous system.

Her fingertips glowed.

She studied the faces of the audience.

The camera chose one young couple for its special attention, two of the more photogenic specimens. Their faces were fixed at one shared angle, their eyes spellbound as they gazed at the Dome. Now the viewpoint shifted to the Pleasure Dome itself. The screen fizzed with lines of snow and pixel dust. And even the moon was faulty; the silver globe that hung above was flickering with cloud cover, atmospherics.

The light was failing.

The crowds at the fence stood with their heads bowed, in reverence before the Church of the Sacred Image.

They might well be praying.

Nola’s skull buzzed with noise. She could imagine the global audience in their millions, in their true goggle-eyed multitude, watching this poor young woman, Melissa.

Three weeks and more. Twenty-three days of the body under constant surveillance, loved and prodded by lenses and microphones, followed and scanned, examined. Days and nights of the mind being sucked, hollowed out, scoured and framed, images pulled loose and projected wide onto the

Dome that lay above her, around her on all sides, enclosing.

Viewers worldwide lay bets on the extent and future chronology of Melissa's breakdown. They *wanted* the breakdown. It would be sustenance to them, fuel for the desperate party of their own lives, and compensation for all the cold nights they had stared at their own faces in like manner, the mirror's need drawing them forth. The viewers yearned to see themselves up there on the screen, not as superstars, but as broken people, survivors damaged by love and by hate and work and departing children and illness and grief and frustration and betrayal and laziness and distrust and all the games they had played and lost in the past: well now let somebody else fail, they were saying, let them suffer instead of me.

Be my mirror...

Crack me open.

Show me the mind's dark contents. Fuck me up. Pity me. Throw me crumbs, I do not care. Nail yourself to the cross of entertainment for me. Let me see that, let me worship at the shrine of glass.

Nola felt weak. Her body swayed.

On screen, the miniature cameras moved in, their gentle lenses searching the Dome's interior space, finding Melissa once again. Finding flesh.

Her forearm filled the screen.

She had fashioned a tiny blade from a stone, and with this she was writing in perfect, precious, delicate letters of blood and dirt her message from before, her constant refrain:

DADDY I H

George Gold couldn't take his eyes off the picture, off the message as it appeared in letters, one by one.

DADDY I HATE Y

Nola touched his arm gently. 'Don't do it, George. Don't look at her.'

'But she's crying out, isn't she? Look now, please. She's crying out for love.'

'For your love?'

Melissa was carefully slicing the difficult shape of the letter O. This was intercut with shots of the Dome from the outside, the same letters in crimson also forming on the exterior surface, large size, a flow and flux of pain.

The Dome screamed in silence.

George's face set tight. 'Of course for my love, what else? Look! I'm the subject matter of her essay. Nobody else. Me.'

Nola felt faint. She said, 'Nobody's survived in there for more than five weeks, you know that. Most of them go crazy. That's why the crowd gathers, it's why we watch. We want the madness.'

He nodded. ‘Melissa will do it, she’ll beat the record. Melissa will win.’

‘That’s what you hope?’

‘She’s my girl. My true brave little girl.’ George took a drink. ‘You should’ve seen her, Nola, in the weeks previous to this. Melissa would turn up unexpected at my door, drunk to the limits, screaming at me. Other times, I would come home and find her in the house already, just sitting there in silence, in shadows. Staring at me. Just...just staring. Hours would pass by. Once she was found wandering half naked in the street, demanding that people be her friend.’ He wiped his eyes. ‘So this...her entering the Dome, it’s a way forward, don’t you think. Tell me you think that?’

Nola moved back a little.

‘Why don’t you go and see her, George? Speak to her. I’m sure they’d let you in.’

No response. He could not take his eyes off the screen, where the ritual continued.

A final letter. The message was now complete, as one on skin and screen and Dome:

DADDY I HATE YOU

George’s eyes closed. His face held itself tight. Nola could see his age, peeking out from beneath all the lift and stretch work he’d had done in the last few years.

He smiled to himself and then looked up at her.

‘All I want,’ he murmured, ‘all I want is to reach down there through the screen, to take my daughter into my arms, to touch my palms against her head, one hand on each side, like this, you see?’

Hands held in front of him, just far enough apart.

‘To press my fingers lightly against the implants where they glow, to feel the heat of those electrical stigmata, and to...and to send my own thoughts into her mind, to converse with her in this way, this gentle way.’

He gazed at Nola, his eyes wet, aglow.

‘That’s all.’

Nola spoke softly: ‘The people are waiting for Melissa to kill herself.’ She moved in close to him, tender now. ‘They want her to explode, to blow her mind open with one last cascade of thoughts and dreams. It’s what they really and most truly desire. You do know that?’

Flicker...

George hesitated. One hand dropped to the remote. His head shook, barely discernible.

‘Why? Why are you saying this?’

‘It’s the truth.’

George turned to the screen. The broadcast image of his child blurred in his sight.

Nola held her breath. Now she had to speak. To speak of herself

Sweat on her body, feverskin.

'I'm in trouble, George.'

Silence. Then he coughed. 'Trouble?'

'It's serious.'

Looking now. Looking at Nola. Considering her face, its various aspects; her body shape, the language of her stance; her hands, the way they were held in front of her, folded across her stomach. It was a pose he had never seen her do before. Certainly, it was not one of her prescribed moves, not part of the official choreography. He would have to have words with someone. Another word to be added to the long list of words to be had with so many people; it was growing daily. It was threatening to pull him under, it was smothering him.

He lit a big cigar, by way of compensation.

'Is it the song, the music?'

'It's not the music.'

'You've got talent, Nola. You can actually sing, which is more than most of my darlings can manage.'

Nola didn't respond.

George just carried straight on: 'The song's good. It's better than good. In fact, it's probably too good. That's the problem, see? It's a flawed masterpiece of the new hyperpop culture. And as you know, the only good masterpiece is a flawed masterpiece.'

'You really think it's that great?'

'Oh, for certain. It's just that nobody knows it yet.'

Nola laughed.

'What then?' George shook his head. 'You need to write your own stuff, is that it? Walking along some crazy shit intellectual pathway, aiming random ditties at serious young men and women with artificial hang-ups.'

Nola...silent. Staring.

George at a loss.

'So then. We do some variants. A pumped-up mix for the keep-fit classes. Something brutal for the clubs, another one for the floppy hair brigade. Break that market, work outwards from there. Get the Gays on side. Go into the schools. Tour the marginals. Maybe concoct a little scandal for the tabloids. All I'm asking, really, is that you stay loyal, stay true to the brand.'

'You're not listening to me, George.'

'You're not saying anything. You're just standing there.'

'I want out.'

George looked stricken.

‘Okay. Shit. Look. I’ll put my team on it, my best people. Hold all other projects. Kick it to hell and back. What do you say?’

‘No. It’s too late.’ Calm and clear and cool.

George blew smoke.

‘Nola, you’re not looking too well. What’s wrong? Talk to Georgie.’

Nola stared at him.

George stared back.

He had the strangest feeling just then, that Nola knew he was lying about the efforts they could make. The lie was there, exposed. It was part of the game, this make-believe: never to be talked about, never admitted. But now there was a crack in the wall and the two of them, creator and creation, peered at each other through it.

George spoke softly. ‘Whatever pain you’re feeling now, believe me, there are people in place to help you.’

Nola finished her drink.

‘There is no help.’ She came up close to her manager. ‘Stand up.’

‘What?’

Her voice was cold. ‘Get to your feet.’

‘Jesus. I’m taken aback. More than somewhat, baby doll. Don’t talk to me like that-’

‘Get up, you fat fuck. Look at me.’

George stood up.

Nola examined his face. She studied him. ‘It’s right there in your eyes. You can’t hide it from me any longer. You wanted this to happen.’

‘Not true.’

‘It’s the primitive attitude, isn’t it. Like you’re giving out the sacred tablets of music from on high and the people should be grateful.’

‘You think I’m like that, really?’

‘You need me to fail. It’s simple. You’re finished with me. Now you’ll find yet other young woman. Or even a young man, this time. Maybe a beautiful hermaphrodite. Whatever turns you on. Some pliant teenager. An android, perfectly fashioned. That would be your ultimate dream.’

‘Granted to that.’

‘You think I’m through.’

George shrugged.

‘I’m not through. I’m just starting.’ Nola moved over to the screen. ‘Watch me.’

The Dome still showing. Melissa Gold at peace for now within her small, enclosed realm, hunched up, rocking gently.

Gentle traces of snow blur on the transmission.

Static fuzz.

Nola felt the exact same patterns of interference inside her body, her nerves crackling.

She spoke: ‘You made me, George. I know that. You took me up when I was nothing and you made me your own. You pushed me through the machine, transforming me. You changed me top to bottom: new hair, new expressions, new clothes. A new name, even. A new voice.’

‘Nothing more than I did for myself.’

Nola looked at him.

‘It’s true. Sweetness, I came up from the worst possible start. We have to strip away, cut ourselves free from what we used to be, press eject. Remember all that, back at the mansion? Your first day of training. Lesson one. Making a life away from the rules, away from the numbers? All that? Well, I was younger than you, when I started out. Oh, talented for sure but ripe for some cheating management type. Got myself a bad deal, lost thousands on royalties. But you, baby. See now, you’ve got me. I’m here. I’m the King to your Queen.’

Nola shook her head.

‘George, you’ve made me ill.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘You’ve fucked me up, can’t you see that?’

‘Now look--’

A strange wailing cry came from deep in Nola’s throat as she lashed out with her boot, kicking at the screen of the visionplex.

Crackkck...

Fragile. Still holding.

George could not move in time. ‘Nola!’

She drew back and kicked again.

Krstttishhht!

Glass crack. Sharded, web brittle.

Cracked, broken.

George grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling her away.

‘What the hell are you doing?’

Nola sucked in breath. Such sweet, cold-eyed defiance.

‘Watch me now.’

She pulled up her shirt, showing herself.

Showing the bruise,

a flesh-bound monitor lodged there,

larger now,

filling the skin of her, stretched side to side of her abdomen, reaching upwards towards her chest.

George stared at this in wonder.

He felt faint. The world was opening up, he was being sucked in.

His face burned in the glow.

His lips curled upwards.

Heart pounding.

And he fell to his knees before the sight. He consumed greedily the image with his eyes, itching with need, seeing it clearly. Seeing, feeling...

The moving image of a bird on Nola's skin.

A white dove it was. Well travelled, dirty of feather, blood speckled. The poor creature was trapped inside her stomach, that's what it looked like.

Flap, slow flap of wings.

Slow blade of wings beating in time.

Distant music.

Solo violin, plaintive.

Wingbeat.

And once again, Nola picked up the buzz of broadcast, the sheer loving power of being watched, of being viewed. Her body pulsed with the sudden release of sweet chemicals. She felt her mind clicking through the pathways, through the echoes of breath and fire that licked and tickled the air.

Ether flux.

A sonic incarnation. Pictorial explosion.

The chaos of life sent out to be received, by her, by Nola Blue alone, the aerial charmer.

Here it is, people!

Here and Now!

Keep watching. Tune in.

Dreams for sale.

Don't miss them!

Nola was floating through warm pulses of electromagnetic energy, adrift in the haze of data. And what was once invisible to her and to all was now made plain and glorious: the air was alive, on fire with radiosonic drifts of colour and fuzz and crackle, way beyond the human spectrum.

Sxtttkzssssk!

Blood-wired. She was scanning the air, pulling down signals from chaos, transforming them into sound and video on her skin. Feeling the surge.

Taste of metal, tongue blur.

Stttzzzzttt.

Loving the edge of pain. Static charge.

Zxkrtsssss.

Transmission flesh. She was changing the channel of herself, finding the new programme that she wanted.

Sound! Action! Vision!

George stared at the bruise.

He stared at the pale-skinned figure of his daughter as she rolled around on the floor of her sphere of confinement.

Pleasure Dome. Live from the source.

Right there on the body of Nola, on the belly.

Georgie Boy viewed this.

Right there. His daughter's face. Close up on the skin, on the flesh-and-blood vision screen.

Nola pulled up her sleeve, revealing her left forearm.

Words were written there, blood words. They dripped red but could not be touched. George tried to: he put his fingers into the blood, feeling it to be dry, an image alone.

It was the broadcast of a wound.

DADDY I HATE YOU

He was left searching for words.

Finding one.

Fuck

-12-

Live from the Pleasure Dome.

Early evening lightfall.

Shrouded in vision, encaged by images, folded in the curved membrane of dreams...Melissa confesses.

I am alone.

Alone now.

Yes.

Daddy...are you there?

Are you there for me? Are you watching?

Let me sing for you.

La, la, la. La, la, la.

I was once an angry child. Now I sit, meek and mild. Now I sing, sing my song.

I was sitting in the main hall at school...

Yes. In the main hall with all the other girls. Row upon row of us, all struggling to finish the exam paper on time.

Oh, but I was doing well. I was a good student.

I had plans. Dreams.

I glanced up at the clock. There were twelve more minutes to go. The pen moved over the paper, writing easily.

A world of knowledge, line by line by line...

And then...and then suddenly I woke up.

I can't explain it any other way.

I could not write anymore. Not a single line. The pen fell to the desktop, and then to the floor. My hands gripped at the desk, one on each side.

Like this.

I held on, tightly.

I had the feeling...it came out of nowhere...the feeling that if my fingers should open now, if my hands should slip, well then I was sure that I would in some way simply drift apart.

Drift...apart.

I could hear a noise in my head, a whistling sound, high pitched. And then...and then...

And then...

I don't know, I've never been sure of the memory after that point. I do remember being sent home in disgrace, and you were there waiting for me. Daddy, you were so angry, so very angry, shouting at me, and I tried to explain, I really did, I tried to tell you about the feelings I was having, the strangeness of life taking me over.

But you would not listen.

You wouldn't listen, Daddy.

Well, it's the same feeling. I have it now. In here, in this place. But more so, more dreadful.

I do believe I'm going a little bit crazy.

Yes, I know. That's the whole point.

I do know.

I'm scared.

Look at me.

Things are happening. I can't work them out. I'm seeing things. Shapes. Figures. When it gets dark outside and I lie here under the Dome, beneath the moon and the stars, and just before my eyes close, I see visions.

Ghosts.

I don't know what to call them.

Shimmering bodies of light and heat.

They crowd around the Dome, whispering to me.

So many words.

But I can never make out what they are saying.

They yearn.

Perhaps they have come to save me.

Coming here into the Dome has made me realise: there is only one person whose gaze I truly need.

Oh, it's so weird. Here I am, talking to myself, well, to the camera, the microphone, to the globe, but really it's just like I used to do when I was a child. Talking to the mirror. You used to make me stare at myself in the glass, do you remember? You told me to put on the make-up and the fancy outfits from the dressing-up box and to practise my poses. And you told me I would be famous one day, if I kept practising, kept spinning and smiling and laughing and making up songs and stories. Those were good times, weren't they, daddy? We had fun. If only they could've lasted for ever, those days.

I'm closing myself to all other faces but yours.

I'm filled up with love for you.

But sometimes I hate you.

But the hate just turns back into love. How can I stop myself?

I was too much of a bad spirit. I got that from you, of course, but it meant I could never be the perfect little girl you wanted me to be. And so you moved on to other girls, other young women. I had to

stand there and watch and applaud and celebrate your success as you chose your new projects, your special ones. I watched you groom and polish and train them, and shape them to your will, creating your little fantasies, setting them loose into the world.

It could've been me, Daddy. When would my turn come around?

Do you wonder about me sometimes? Do you like to look at me on the screen? I'm reaching out now, can you see me, can you see my hand?

Reach out. If you can.

Oh God, what have I done?

I have lost myself completely.

I am the mirror where another woman's face lives. I'm the picture in the paper, the half-known woman falling out of night clubs, the stick-figure daughter of the world-famous music man. The girl with the haunted eyes, the stark red camera-flash eyes.

I am the closed door.

I am the whisper in the dark, the lost words to the lost song, the one you would never let the public hear.

I am your daughter. Your only child.

Look at me.

Hate me.

Turn away from me.

Love me.

-13-

Rain falling.

Flash of streetlamps. Road signs. Susurration. Whoosh of vehicles passing, yellow blur of light.

Nola was hardly aware of the steering wheel as it turned under her gloved fingers. Slow rhythm of the wipers across the windscreen, each slow wave of droplets melting the world.

Music:

Slow pulse of Bio-Dub music playing

from the skin of Nola,

channelled from a pirate station.

Electric blood running through her, nerves dancing alive with prickles and motion. Palms itching, burning. Movies and broadcasts coming through to her, moving on her, spreading further over her body, she could feel them creeping.

The Pleasure Dome called from her stomach.

Nola tuned in.

Colours swirling in heat patterns across flesh, shapes forming.

She heard Melissa speaking.

...the room at the end of the corridor...hide and seek... the picture in the paper...the stick-figure...

Nola's skin tingled with each word, each hissssss of static.

The road glistened.

Beep. Beep. Beep Beep Beep.

The pained, plastic song of Nola's bug.

That would be George calling up, no doubt. George, with his pleas; the voice still ringing in her ears, his voice of greed and wonder and manic desire.

Your problems are over, my Nola.

Let me handle this. Let me nurture this new magic talent and send it out towards the public eye.

Sweetness!

By entering the machine, you have become the machine, you have embraced the machine. To turn against it now is pure hypocrisy.

You're my special projection.

My favourite creation.

Nola was jumping from mood to mood, from despair at her fate, to exhilaration at the power she might have. One moment she wanted

nothing more than to be cured, wiped clean; the next she imagined picking up every broadcast currently etherborne and to feel herself glorified in the flux, the overload, the sheer white heat of NOW.

She was running on pure energy.

Keep driving.

This her only plan.

Night folded itself along the road, pushed away momentarily by the car's glowlamps. A single light seen in the distance. Nearer. Shining red, then blue, then golden.

Neon sign. Nine letters still alight, two letters dead, one flashing half broken.

T E FALL N MOON.

Nola pulled up outside the place, a roadside bar. She felt herself being urged on by the spirit that held her. She'd taken to calling it the Image Demon, a picture in her mind of the virus as it claimed possession.

Out. Walking. Towards people.

Long coat, glossy and black, wrapped tight around her, buttoned. Dark glasses. Gloves and scarf. Really too warm for such a fashion, but she had no choice.

Doorway. Glass cracked in one panel. Inside, tables and chairs draped half in darkness, the rest far too bright. Smell of hardworking flesh, sweat. A sleazy hole. Lots of customers, a lively bunch. Laughter, shouts. Fists banging down on the bar top. Portapops and telebugs and glamacams and somapods flashed and whirred and sang and glimmered and sparkled in people's hands, against faces, in handbags and on tabletops: a choir of electronic angels hovering in parallel company to the drinkers. Too much humanity but this was just what she needed, this would do it. Just some good old human noise to drown out the signals from her skin, the pictures, the calling voices.

Pleasure Dome was playing live on a giant visionplex screen at the back of the room. Melissa's words unrolled across the bottom of the screen as she spoke them. Madness in the lines, the things being said. The craziness building. Most of the clientele present ignored the programme, lost to their own worlds, their own captivities. But a number of spectators were standing frozen where they were, staring in awe at the screen, in cold drunken witness.

Nola counted a dozen of these abject viewers, eyes glued to the image of the Dome. She went up close to one such, and saw his eyelids fluttering in time with the static flow from the screen. His mouth hung open as he answered Melissa with a spell of his own:

Please, do not leave me.

Please my sweet oracle, my visionary, do not treat me this way, not

now, not like this.

Stay with me, stay as you are.

Swirl and dance your mind for me, all on view.

Be mine.

Be mine forever...

Alas, it could not be.

Melissa's face was suddenly veiled in fuzz, smeared like a powder wipe.

Flicker...

Channel breakdown.

The viewer cursed. His eyes widened to gather more light, more image, more signal.

And all around the crowd surged and taunted, they fumbled and cursed and swore and danced.

The viewer ignored them.

He might as well be living in a different room.

Nola walked on. She bought herself a lager from the bar, and then found a small space in the crowd to call her own. But almost immediately, a woman came over to her, looking her over, sizing her up. She introduced herself as Evelyn. 'Eva! Call me Eva. Everybody does. I'm completely...mad! Cuckoo. Gone bye-bye. Premises vacated.' A curl of laugh rising from deep inside, expressed finally as a raucous shriek. Eva was more than three-quarters drunk. She was trying to tell Nola how much she really loved her ex, if only the handsome no-good bastard would understand that simple fact and let her back into his life, then everything would be fine once more, everything. So fine.

Here was a woman alive in her own soap opera, her words borrowed and remixed from dialogue and scenes witnessed on the visionplex and the cinema screen through the years.

'What shall I call you?'

'Nola.'

Eva's faraway gaze suddenly locked in place, and her face was fired by a smile to spark diamonds and light a bulb or two in a dead man's heart. 'I like you, Nola. That's your name right, Nola, I got that right?' Nola said yes, correct, well remembered from ten seconds ago. 'I like you Nola, because I can see you're hanging onto a good thing, I know you are. I can just *feel* it. I'm special like that, see. I can FEEL things. And there's something about you, something interesting.' Eva could sense it, a radiance. Her instincts were triggering. She picked up on the warmth, the glow, the hidden dance of energy from Nola's skin.

Evelyn was dressed as a New Model Robot Romantic type. It was a fashion, the ersatz automated look, something she had read about in a Lifestyle magazine. She had started the evening in expert character, but by now, with this many drinks running her veins, her robotic

traits were slipping. The human kept peeping through in words and gestures. She asked, 'What's your personal image status? Like, officially?' Nola shook her head. Evelyn made little chirruping noises with her tongue on her teeth, against her lips. 'Oh baby, baby! You gotta have image status. Apply today! I was like a nine, going on ten. Honestly. But then disaster struck. I was docked three points! Can you believe it? Oh well, life is cruel sometimes, I suppose.' Her fingers played imaginary violin strings, the other arm miming the bow, caressing a sad despairing tune.

Nola looked around for comfort.

On the bar's screen, Melissa's hands were pounding against the curved wall of the Dome. Her fingers stretched out, seen through the surface patterns: a father's eyes, a broken doll, a snail covered in salt, melting.

The twelve frozen viewers raised their hands as though to help her escape. Or to keep her there. Clearly, they could not decide which. Half in love, half in fear.

The image skipped, settled. Fizzed with interference.

Evelyn pulled out a glamacam. 'I love these little things so much, don't you, Nola? I mean, they give everything such a gorgeous sheen!'

'What are you doing?'

'Wait. Keep still. I have to take a picture of you.'

Nola felt a sudden anger.

Her own mind in mirror mode to the wall screen: jump-cut thought patterns, random images, crackle, spark and fuzz.

She told Evelyn to back away.

'I will. I will. But just let me do this. What is that glow you have? Where can I buy it. Does it come in a bottle?'

The wall screen crackled and went black, sputtered with light, died again, came back on. Dome flutter, snowed under with fluff and haze, Melissa's voice caught in a fog of noise. Data readouts jumped and shivered.

Sound of a fuse shorting, magnified loud.

Fzzzztk!

The Dome reappeared, cloaked in static.

Sfzztztsztxztztztsfssstszttttt...

Some of the younger drinkers were cheering by now, enjoying the damage on view. More people turned to the screen. Others checked the programme for themselves on their portapops, the little devices each crackling in time as they found the correct frequency. The screen danced with broken pictures, spluttered with noise. Some viewers booed and jeered. A beer glass glittered through the darklamp air, smashing against a wall. The landlord fiddled desperately with the screen remote. He remembered the riot that happened when the cup

final had gone down in the power cut. Bad days. Bad nasty fucked up days all over.

And within this chaos stood the spellbound ones, bodies at rest, their eyes still locked on course, still fixated. Silent now, each one of them.

Evelyn rubbed a hand along Nola's shoulder, her neck. She said, 'I've seen you before, somewhere. Aren't you one of them singer types?' Fingers on flesh. Hot wet skin. 'Yeah that's it. My sister's got your first tune. Played nothing else for a week or two.'

Nola scratched at her palms. *Skrit, skrit.* Taste of blue burn metal in her mouth. The whole room blurry in her sight. Ears abuzz with noise: croaks, harsh drawn breaths, ribald chanting. Crunch of glass underfoot. Mouths pressed against telebugs, portapops flickering with vids. Nola could feel a shift inside, a spark set loose in the body's red-dark chambers, deep down, and the wall-screen followed suit, clicking to a new programme. Natural History. *Undersea World.* An octopus wafting through deep water, legs curling and uncurling, skin illuminated.

She'd done that herself, Nola felt certain; she made the channel change.

Click, click, click. No hands necessary.

Screen commentary: *The octopus has millions of pigmented and reflective cells in its skin, known as chromatophores.*

Nola's black coat slipped from her shoulders.

By an act of will, the different colours of these skin pixels can be activated, intensified, creating a rippling, animated display.

She felt connected to the screen. Television and radio waves filled the room around her, glowing in silvery webs visible only to herself.

The creature uses this for the purpose of camouflage, to send out threatening signals, or for courtship display.

Click.

Another channel now. A boxing match.

Her own doing.

Nola: the human remote. She peeled off her gloves, one then two.

Click, click.

More channels, the screen stuttering, fizzing.

Punters raised their voices in protest. All seemed of one voice and one vision now, one need. *Bring back the live feed. Bring back the Dome!* A fight was breaking out. The landlord called for order.

Nola Controller shifted, feeling her stomach clench. Her mind pulsed.

Here she was.

Click, click, click.

Here she was, working the waves.

The programme changed to an Arts show: ballerinas twirling in dresses of silver dazzle, the moon a man in a mask, weeping. And every device in the place, every handheld screen showed the same image, the same stream, the same download.

Shouts. Flare up. Drink spillage. *Fuck! Piss off! Lousy fucking machine!* The landlord banged his own remote against the counter, managed to get the picture back.

Pleasure Dome.

Nola flesh-clicked it away, bringing back the dancers, then the octopus once more, now a midnight pool in a forest clearing.

Evelyn turned from the screen.

Nola took off her dark glasses. But her eyes were not on Eva, not on anybody in that room. Nola's eyes shifted focus, soft, watery.

Evelyn could see the glow of warm light seeping through Nola's clothing, the play of colours around this woman's neck. She could hear the voices from the skin, quiet as yet; they drew her nearer.

Eva was breathing on Nola, smelling her.

Perspiration, human flesh.

Something else?

Burnt out wiring, maybe? Electrics.

What was that?

Something wet dripping on hot glass. Pure NOISE.

Zzztsiztzle...

Nola's skin pulled down the broadcasts. She sucked the life out of the screen, peeling images, replacing them. Drawing forth data, making a transfer pass.

Voodoo electrics.

Zxcxttxxtxkzktzttt!

Sudden bursts of colour and noise.

Handheld devices clicked and fizzled and blurred in chaos flow.

The pictures mutated in sync on every single screen in the place. They kissed and bred and gave birth to other images, other sounds, stranger images, stranger sounds. Now the bar's wall-screen pulsed with life, with flashes of extreme violence, hardcore porn, rapid-fire gunshots. Spurts of blood, fake semen, spit. Car crashes. Burning buildings. Two towers falling in clouds of dust. Tongues in close-up, extreme, wet and pink. Cries for help. A severed head. Hands, fingernails long and sharp, tearing at flesh. Stomach wounds opening like slow-motion flowers. Blade-slice edits of rape, murder, torture. Broken glass. Crunch of bone.

The skull's dark output.

All called up by Nola from the ether. All conjured by her, dragged down to earth from one hundred different programmes and

films, all recast by skincast.

The audience fell silent.

All eyes present were bathed in vision light, all drawn to the wall-screen. And then they turned, this crowd, one by one by one, as one, aware of some odd creature in their midst, somebody making this happen.

The woman.

The music star revealed now.

Nola Blue.

They stared at her as they would at a pirate broadcast, a message brought in from another world.

Slowly Nola pulled her shirt open to let them see her stomach, the pictures, the faces, the dancers, the creatures of the deep, the ballerinas circling each other, all the night's haze of message and noise and image.

All shown.

Hush. The place in shock.

Nola stretched out her arms towards the clientele, her viewers, the palms face out and opened up wide to show the image that glowed there on the skin: on each palm a filmed eye, two human eyes gazing at the audience from the warm wet skin of the hands.

Every person there staring at the two eyes that stared back at them.

Staring. Staring back.

Mirrored.

Eye

to

Eye...

Stillness.

Only one breath was drawn in the place.

Evelyn's breath, quiet, contained, her fingers working at the buttons of her glamacam.

Whirrrrr.

Moments passing.

Clikck whirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

Nola moved through the crowd. No one stopped her, none touched her, none dared to. They parted to let her go. And even the guardians at the gateway, those of the black suits and the brick-wall shoulders, they let her pass freely.

The wall-screen flickered as she left the bar.

Zxxt, zscki, sssnmmmmm, sxxt!

Fuse blown. Vision cut.

Blackout.

Evelyn came out of the Fallen Moon, to watch Nola's car moving

away from the curb. She rubbed at her eyes where they stung, and shed tears.

She had seen too much this evening.

Still halfway disbelieving, still in awe.

The glamacam warm in her hands.

Fingers atingle, the tips smeared with colour.

Memory glow.

-14-

Nola drove on, pushing the car to its limits.

No destination.

The only lights around coming from nocturnal tattoo shacks and all-night pharmacies, each neon pulse and strobe hitting like a crackle show, shining from a borderline.

Sun Plague remedies on sale here. Guaranteed results! No prescriptions needed.

Dead shine in Nola's eyes.

Feeling cut off from herself, not quite contained by her own skin. She was a living ghost moving through a series of separate countries, seeking peace, but each country along the way governed by weird laws and weirder people, and herself the weirdest of them all.

Tired. So tired. Need to rest. Need to...

The car was drifting along by its own instruction.

It was time to find a place to crawl to, to crawl into. Somewhere unknown.

Rethink, recharge.

She pulled into the forecourt of the next place that came in view, a small crumbling hotel on a street with only half a name.

Here now. To sleep.

The old man behind the desk looked at her like he knew her from somewhere in a past life but couldn't quite remember when or where. One other person: a solitary man sitting in reception. Young. Neatly dressed. He too stared at her. Somewhat nervous, but like he had the right to stare, as though he owned a part of her already. Nola knew the look. He was viewing her as public property.

She ordered a tray of sandwiches and a coffee and then retreated to her room. Tiny and damp, candlewick spread, the sheets extra tight on the bed. Tepid hot water the colour of rust from pipes that clanked and rang. The food was fine, the coffee better for being cheap and strong, but there was a moment when she almost didn't keep the meal down. But no, her stomach had this urge, a need for fuel. She gulped it. Stench and taste jarring her tongue but that was good, her metabolism like an animal living inside, needing to be fed.

Now she felt better.

Sleep could wait for a while.

Let's see this. Let's brazen it.

Nola stood up and opened the rickety, creaking wardrobe. As she hoped a full-length mirror presented its face to her. Dusty and speckled, stripped of silver here and there, but it was enough. Nola stripped off her clothing and stood there naked before the glass, gleaming, shivering, turning this way and that as she examined her body.

Her stomach offered a talent contest for her viewing pleasure.

Tiny shapes played along her left arm, on the inner side just below the elbow. She looked closer. The shapes were made from numbers: tumbling trade figures.

Faces bloomed and faded, bloomed again on each wrist, each face in conversation across the space between her hands. As she moved her hands apart, the voices raised themselves slightly in volume, to reach across the gap.

A motorway flowed around her right thigh, far into the distance, a car speeding along, vanishing.

Nola twisted her back to the mirror, to see her left shoulder blade alive with bright lush flowers amid tall waving stalks of grass. Insects buzzed the petals, seeking nectar. A gardening show, perhaps.

Each programme had its own sounds, low volume, all merging now into a soft persistent hum.

Her neck received news from foreign lands, the threat of war increasing.

One breast drawled with the burr and bite of Pleasure Dome, Melissa's dreaming thoughts painted on the curve of flesh. The other breast glowed with a games arcade, a place bright with cascades of coins, warm with music.

Now a cartoon cat chased his yellow-feathered nemesis around and around her midriff, crossing from one side to another in their circling progress.

Nola smiled, she couldn't help herself.

She was alive with images.

Here was the skin cinema, creating art.

Infectionism.

At one moment she watched herself from a distance, a viewer; the next she flipped inside and felt the images burn and tumble and slither across the flesh. Confusion reigned. And yet in the bar she had gained some kind of control. Could she do it again, could she learn the new techniques?

Nola breathed deep.

Proceed carefully. Concentrate.

Let go.

Now. Begin. The click and buzz of her mind as she changed the channels of herself. Random hits. Shivers. Fuzzy static, patches of

interference where the signals clashed and fell away momentarily, the pain of this. Skin burn. *Click, click.* Channel 9, Channel 24, Channel 57. Moving on, beyond the normal waves. Picking up radio programmes, taxi calls, police transmissions, citizen's band, satellite pulses. Web-blasts, flexitexts, random input from total strangers, shimmers from Shimmertown, vidi-blips. And beyond that, the ghost voices at the fading edge of the spectrum, *clickxk*, pictures changing in tune with the sounds.

Nola was skinloading.

She was trying to control the waves of transformation, failing, *klxckz*, falling, failing, *zxttixkt*, turning her flesh into a total body-surface chaos pad. Overload of pictures, flash cuts, faces, legs, pistols, car chases, weather reports, crashing seas, bombs exploding, young lovers kissing, hands on flesh, maps, planet Earth from space rotating with the moon in tandem, that kiss again, *zkxixkc*, all of her bodily screen streaming different signals and downloads, a sonic visual mess, complexity, her skin burning now, sweat covered. Nola was lost in each moment as it flowed along the listings of her flesh, tissue melting with noise and colour and dampness, veins flooded with image, *clikxzk*, her mind soft like stars, haze filled: static pulse shadow, ache of muscle, mains hum, ignition, fizz, z*click, zzhhmmmxt, xklikc, zlick, ckiclk, cxzcikcz.*

Losing breath.

Eyes painful with grit and tears.

Blur.

Her mind clicking on, clicking off.

On...Off...

Clicking on and off.

ON

OFF

Her hands coming to press at her stomach, at her thighs, her breasts, arms, to dig in and scratch. *Click. Clikck.* ON. *Fzzzt.* OFF. *Ktch. Zxxt.* ON! *Kttrv.* To pull loose the images, to rip them from her. *Xzzt. Ktick. Zzsxct. Cktich.* Tearing images from the screen of her skin, her one desire to be free of all this, to be clean again. Hands digging in, digging. *Cliick, txklickc, click, czxxikiclk.* Blood. Jolt. *Clcik, ckkickzx.* Nerves jumping and then the scream coming out of her, out of her body, and now all the pictures suddenly breaking with human faces, suddenly as one, one hundred mouths in close-up, red maw, teeth, all of them screaming. Herself. Her own mouth, this one true red raw mouth of hers joining in the scream.

Arhhhghhshyyrhhhhhhh!

She fell to the floor, onto her knees, her hands coming up to clasp around her face.

She cried out. Every voice.

Howl!

Ahhfgrhhhazjhhhhjarghhcxxzhhhhhghhhhhh!

Bang.

Somebody's fist on the wall. No, not the wall. The door. Somebody knocking on the door, hard. Demanding to be let in.

Go away.

Nola's voice, a mere breath. Whisper.

Please. Go away...

The knocking continued.

Other voices now. Out there.

Why can't they leave me alone? What can't they?

The sound of a key in the door lock.

No!

Nola tried to get up, to get to her feet, to pull some clothes over her, a bed sheet, anything.

To cover her shame, ugliness, her splendour.

The old man from reception was there, staring in at her. And then another man pulling him back, talking to him, Nola hearing only the scream of noise inside her own head, hands clutched at the bed sheet.

Clutching, clutching...

Blind.

Blind panic.

-15-

Evelyn Moore came home drunk, crash-landed, sprawled herself across an unkempt duvet.

Slept for an hour or two.

Glimmers woke her. Shivers.

The night. That woman in the bar. What had happened?

Her eyes part-opened in the dark.

What the fuck happened tonight?

Suddenly alive, more than halfway sober.

Cold minded.

She got up and found her glamacam, viewed the screen, seeing once again the woman with the glowing skin, the body of pictures, images dancing across flesh, across hands.

Nola. Nola Blue, music star.

Some kind of Vision-Screen Woman?

This was major league gossip, news, downloadable sizzle.

Now Eva was fully awake, clothed, washed and spruced and sitting at her boxcomp. She wired the vidiflex direct to input and viewed the result full-screen, full colour, sound and detail enhanced as far as the dial would go.

She worked for an hour or two, setting up a new vinesite, not bothering about design perfection at this stage, just the need to get the news out there, to communicate this wonder to the world.

Fingers on the SEED switch, and...

clikkck

Channelsk1n*vine was now active.

The footage of Nola in all her televisual glory set off through etherspace, drifting through wires and waves, encrypted, entangled, bouncing off way-stations, repelling noise, multiplying along webs and nodal points, fixing on signals of attraction, falling like image dust on receivers, here to be downloaded, decoded, dragged down to earth by terminal pods and tagspikes and cliphounds, by all the seekers out there, the message detectors, all picking up on this broadcast from paradise, the living breathing woman with the vision skin. Viewers tuned in. Word spreading, portapops passing on the link, somapods whispering each to each, telebugs flicking their wings open and singing the news full score, tenfold, a thousandfold.

Click-jammers came awake.

Rumours converged and diverged along pathways of ones and zeros. The night buzzed with blipspeak.

Mouthnet whispered, sang, shouted, overloaded.

Shimmertown sparkled with shimmers, a few to begin with, then many more, as the world's viewers clocked in, sparking back and forth with their own thoughts and feelings.

Nola lived on, no longer screenbound, no longer of flesh alone, but etherised.

Evelyn opened a buzzcircle, got the first requests within minutes: messages for Nola, wherever she may be.

> Nola baby! Here's my facepic. Skincast me!

> Fleshtastic. All the way! Please please please show the world my puppy dog dancing. It's supacool.

> It's sum kinda trick, right? Sum crappy George Gold hype.

> No. It's true. I heard it good from a friend. He was there! In the bar.

> Nola…You are Womankind 2.0.

> Come visit me, NolaBlue. Check my podswap.

> Oh God this is so freaky! I want to be like her! Where do I get plugged in? Anybody?

> Does she do porncasts? I will offer my services.

> Screen me up, VizScrn Girl. Let me be in yr programme.

> Nola. Sing the body electric, why don't you?

Evelyn gathered the input, turned it round, set the vine to auto and leaned back in her chair, tingling with pleasure, drinking coffee and eating cereal from a striped bowl.

Whilst in her halfdreaming mind…
A nightair gold shiver of messages
moves across waves of moonlit
wires and particles.
Globewise: eyes are dazzled bright
as fingers click and tap
in motion to the
data dance.

-16-

Slow jazz on the radio. Yesteryear misty music.

Bedside lamp: warm yellow glow in one corner. The rest of the room shaded.

Nola Blue was sitting on the bed, drinking from a chipped mug filled with brandy. Her body was wrapped in a white sheet, nothing more.

The man leaned against the wall.

He said, 'I recognised you, of course. I saw you arriving and I said to myself, there she is, that's Nola Blue. Number one around the world with your first single.'

Nola kept her head down.

The man continued: 'It's not often I get to meet a famous person.'

'I'm not.'

'Not famous? Or not a person?'

Nola looked at him.

Mid twenties. Face half in shadow. Long hair combed back. The young man from downstairs, from reception.

'Neither,' she answered.

The man folded his arms. 'You're a creature like me, the unknown species.'

'I'm not like you.'

'A lonesome beast with a thorn in its side. One dreadful rainy night it happens, the pinprick of fear. Can a person really be so alone, even with all the friends and lovers in the world? Ouch! It hurts, doesn't it? But not enough to make you do anything about it. Nag, nag. All these years of trying to get rid of the thing, nag, nag, nag, and still it persists, still its jabs and spikes you. And instead of bringing up the hunger in you, all it does is leave you bored with yourself. Isn't that right?'

Nola could no longer look at him.

'Evidence,' he went on. 'Even global superstars get to feel world-weariness.'

'When allowed to.' Her voice quiet.

'What's that?'

'When their managers allow such feelings.'

'And how often do these managers, as you call them, allow such feelings?'

‘About once a year.’

The young man shook his head. ‘Now that is sad, it really is. With me, Nola, you can feel anything you want, at any time you like. Is that good for you?’

Nola hesitated. ‘Yes.’

‘But you’re in a bit of a state, aren’t you? Just now?’

She nodded.

He moved across to the window, which he opened partway. The sudden feel of cold night air.

‘I made a recording once, of the sound of an anthill.’ He spoke now in a lowered tone. ‘I was only a kid. I had a cheap tape machine and a crappy microphone, which I pushed gently into the soil. I pressed record and left it there for half an hour. That night I turned off all the lights and lay on my bed, and played back the tape. I was nine years old.’

His voice was pulse-like, hypnotic.

‘It was the sound of fire crackling, electricity burning through wires. A human brain at work. I lay there, transfixed, falling into sleep. The sound penetrated my dreams.’

He turned to Nola.

‘By day, I’m a cold caller. We sell advertising space. Emptiness, if you will. I sit in my cubicle, ringing people up, strangers, to gently hound them. The pre-programmed words unfold on the monitor and my lips make the requisite movements to bring the words alive in my mouth, in the wires, the air that separates us all, in the ears of the listeners. This was supposed to be just a stopgap, you know, something to keep me going until my secret projects kicked in, my plans. Three years I’ve been there. Recently, I was promoted. Now I circle the cubicles, making sure that people do the same as I did, following the script. And little by little, call by call, the void closes in: the lost connection, the dead line, the noises.’

He stepped nearer.

‘And then at night, at the weekends, I travel into sound. I record the world in miniature, the world inside the world.’

Nola whispered back, ‘Tell me more.’

‘Birdsong, rainfall on leaves, on water, animal calls, night owls, people arguing on park benches, the magnetic core of badly-tuned antique radios and televisions. I like fuzz and crackle and feedback. Analogue grit. Once, I placed the microphone inside the body of a dead mouse as insects devoured the flesh. Life itself, always on the fadeout. And then one morning I woke up in a scorching hotel room with a woman lying naked next to me, a stranger, recording equipment scattered on the bed sheets. Her body was still adorned by contact mikes, five of them, each taped in place to a vital area of flesh.

And even as this woman stirred and awoke and whispered and smiled at me, I thought to myself, where the hell am I? Where am I going with this?'

His voice fell silent.

Nola was aware of all the noises that filled the quiet: the creak of wood panelling, the rattling flush of a toilet down the corridor, the mini-bar's thermostat activating. Also, her own body working at low level: the constant shroud of interference, the random red-yellow spikes of heat that made her skin crackle.

She tried to stand and regretted it instantly, her skull aglimmer with light, spilling over into a steady grey drone. She could hardly think straight. One hand came up to her head, thumb and fingers pressing on each temple. She squeezed.

'Are you okay?'

The man came to her. He looked uncertain.

'It's nothing.'

'Are you sure?'

'Stay away from me.'

Nola was fighting the static waves, trying to keep them down. Noise, echoes. Voices. Indecipherable. She felt she was being called, summoned, and she reached out to answer, to belong at last, to be free from all this pain and doubt, and then the man's hands were on her, calming her. Nola let herself be guarded, and she rested once more on the bed, the noise dwindling now, fading, leaving her mind empty, homesick, lined with shadow.

The man gave her room. 'Does that happen often?'

Nola nodded. 'Yes, but not that bad. Some kind of attack.'

He stood there watching her, as she drank her brandy down and asked for a refill. One for her, one for himself.

'I don't know your name,' she said.

'That's right.'

'Will you tell me?'

'If I did, Nola, would it mean anything to you?'

'Of course it would.'

The young man smiled. 'And fifteen minutes after we part, it will drift away from memory.'

'No. That wouldn't happen'

'What can I mean to you?'

'You helped me.'

He smiled as he took out a cigarette. 'Do you mind?'

Nola shook her head.

'You want one?'

'Please. Just a drag or two.'

He lit a cigarette, handed it to her. Nola inhaled.

The man watched. ‘Good?’

She breathed out. ‘Jesus. It’s been a while.’

‘It suits you.’

They passed the cigarette back and forth between them.

‘You seem to be alone,’ he said, ‘for somebody so well known, I mean.’

Nola shrugged.

‘Do you have a boyfriend?’

She laughed. ‘I have…companions. I’m not sure if they count.’

‘Why not?’

‘Oh, you only ever see them in photographs, in the press. And there’s always a caption. Something like: *Number one star Nola Blue seen at sleazy night club with her latest “companion”, actor Martin Finchley.* That kind of thing. *Nola flaunts her new “companion” at a product launch.* On and on.’

‘And what are they like, these boys, in reality?’

‘I’m not sure if they exist, in reality. Not as such. George finds them for me.’

‘George?’

‘George Gold. My manager.’

‘Ah yes. Famous George. Right. You’re one of those.’

‘One of…’

‘One of those creations.’

Nola looked at him. Cold. ‘I think we need to…’

‘Yes?’

‘Can you leave me now, please. I need to get dressed.’

He stubbed out the cigarette.

‘Where are you going?’ He stepped towards her once more. ‘Where can you go? Is there anybody, truly, who can understand you?’ He stared at her. She turned away. He leaned in, speaking softly. ‘When I saw you tonight, Nola, through that doorway. When I saw your skin. Oh…the glory of it. It’s like your body was on fire, with pictures, sounds. With energy.’

She could not look away now. ‘What am I?’ she asked.

His reply, a whisper: ‘Some kind of messed-up beauty.’ Eyes locked on hers. ‘Some kind of fucked-up beauty, beyond measure.’

Tremble glow of flesh.

Sudden image flow across her face…

Video film of the night sky. Stars, the moon, the brief flash of a comet.

Now. The face itself. Becoming new, changing.

Gone. Bare skin once more.

‘Oh my. That was…’ He could hardly find the words. ‘That was amazing.’

Nola asked: ‘Why me, though? Why?’

‘I don’t know. You’ve been chosen.’

‘But why choose me?’

‘It’s about being receptive, open to all channels.’

Nola shook her head, sighed.

The young man stepped back a little. ‘You’re not the only one suffering from this.’

Nola looked at him.

‘There are others. A few more, scattered across the globe. Russia, Thailand, Mexico. So…you’re not alone. Not entirely. And there will be more of your kind, as the months progress.’

‘My kind?’

Nola felt strangely charmed by this thought, by this idea of others out there, other beings aglow with the same flow and static charge of images. If she could only find one of them, one or more of them, join hands with them, surely that would calm her.

‘How do you know this?’ she asked.

‘From the ether. I was hacking channels one night. I had the wavecomp tuned to ghost frequencies, picking up broadcasts from around the world, semi-legal stations sending out messages, knowledge, the kind that governments try to keep secret.’

Nola felt the spark of flickering life, the gaps between signals. Pictures forming and moving beneath her skin, seeking transmission. ‘You’re a conspiracy theorist?’ she asked.

‘I guess I was. But now the truth sits here in front of me.’

‘Carry on.’

‘And then I found this strange programme. It was hidden between two other stations, hardly there at all, a wash of static. I could hear voices seeking to be heard from within the noise.’

Nola recognised the effect.

‘It was a site I’d never come across before. I magnified and isolated the wave as best I could, until the voices came clearer.’

‘They were in English?’

‘All different languages. Some completely unknown to me. Others more familiar. English, French, German.’ He smiled. ‘And that’s where I first heard about the parasite signal.’

‘What is that?’

‘Do you remember the Klein-Zecker changeover?’

‘Yes. Vaguely. The new broadcasting signal?’

‘That’s the one. It started earlier this year. An infinite amount of data packed into a fractal wave. Well, the parasite signal seems to be an unforeseen side effect of the new technology. Of course, everybody’s in denial about this.’

‘What does it do, this…parasite?’

‘It’s a viral infection taking over human flesh. But a virus not of any known organic nature. One made from the ether, itself.’

Nola shook her head. ‘I’d call you mad.’

‘You would have, a few days ago.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’d feel the same. But now...’

They stared at each other. Nola saw something in his eyes, something she had not seen for a while.

And she looked at him properly for the first time.

Maybe a little older than she first thought.

Black messy hair falling over his brow, his deep-set eyes.

Eyes that drew her towards them, darkness within.

Redblood mouth,

pale skin that hardly saw daylight.

A face of contrasts, interesting.

I could almost...

She switched herself off from the feelings.

‘What else did you find out?’

The young man hesitated. ‘Well...’

‘Please, tell me.’

‘They never last long, those infected. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

Nola nodded. The man held her gaze.

‘Of course, you might be different. The parasite signal is still in genesis, still forming. Who knows what it will turn into, when it finds the optimum host.’

Somebody walked along the corridor, outside: slow tipsy footsteps moving past the closed door.

The young man sat on the bed, a suitable distance from Nola. ‘We have flooded ourselves with the media in all its many forms. Our minds are now open to signals. We have become aerials.’

Nola closed her eyes briefly.

Triggers. Click, clicking in her head.

This guy knew something of her.

She made a smile and the man edged closer. ‘Now the signal starts to contaminate us directly, Nola. Flesh is analogue, and within your body the broadcast melts directly into the human form.’

She looked away. ‘I’m sick.’

‘This isn’t an illness. This is a change in the world’s zeitgeist.’

‘All this is supposed to make me feel good?’

‘Not that. But something. It means something, don’t you see?’

‘It means pain. Loneliness.’

The young man nodded. For a moment he was silent, and then: ‘My name’s Joe. Joseph Palmer.’

‘Good. That’s good to know.’

‘Nola, let me see you.’

‘I can’t.’

‘This is something I’ve only heard about, only dreamt about.’

‘I’m not a freak show.’

Joe’s hand reached out. Nola flinched. ‘No. Don’t touch me. Please.’

‘I was just looking for the ON switch.’

Nola groaned.

‘That was a joke, by the way.’

‘I know. It’s just that…’

She hesitated.

‘What?’ Joe asked. ‘It just happens?’

‘Yes. Well, no. Not lately. I’ve been gaining control.’

‘I’ve heard about that effect. It’s been mentioned. People can learn.’

Nola turned to face him directly. ‘Joe?’

‘What is it?’

‘Is this…do you know, is this contagious?’

‘I believe it is. But you have to get close.’ His voice was hushed, warming. ‘Real close.’

He placed his hands on her shoulders, close to the neck on each side. Waiting for the spark.

Quietly: ‘Show me.’

Nola closed her eyes.

His fingers stroked her hair where it hung down one side of her face, and then the face itself, gently, feeling the heat that lay just beneath the skin, the pictures and sounds waiting to seep through the pores. The tingle as the images formed, as they melted together, separated, formed again into new shapes, not seen as yet, not alive, not broadcast, only concepts, promises, ideas, raw data in the bodymix.

His hand rested on her face, barely moving, just the fingertips lightly caressing. He started to speak. ‘I’ve lost my way, Nola.’

Her eyes came slowly open.

‘I’ve lost my way. My soul has seeped away into my day job. All I have left is what I can see in front of me, what I listen to. What I touch.’

And Nola saw in his gaze her own disease returned. She was the poison oracle, he was the monitor. And then her body started to respond and to speak softly of its own desires. A child’s voice rose from her skin like a cloud telling a story, a tale of the drifting moon lost at sea and the ship made of beeswax that lugged the moon home again.

Colours melted on her face, forming the ship, the lonely moon, the young boy who smiled at its return.

Joe Palmer trembled as he saw this. He could hardly believe that he was so close to the source, his hand moving on down her face now, gentle across her lips - moist, red - down her chin to her neck.

Fingers, decoding,
witnessing.
He leant in close and breathed on her.
He *breathed*...
Pictures rippled under the motion of air,
and shimmered,
settled once more as he moved on,
fingers across her breasts,
under the bed sheet, around her stomach
softly drawn,
a scratch of nail
sending the images aflame,
dancing.
Nola shivered,
The bed sheet fell away.
Skin channels blurred over to new stations,
programmes travelled through her
caressing her skin as Joe caressed her now,
now, lips barely touching hers,
then...
touching,
(ah)
converging, parting,
so that pictures dazzled and hummed on her flesh
fading and rising under the fingertips,
and finally to kiss:
Contact...
Real lips on broadcast lips, on real lips,
on broadcast lips.
His body...
wiry, covered in scars both old and new,
self-inflicted.
Her body glowing with stolen beauty,
skinpixels dissolving
making images:
Tigers prowling in bright electric colours
sunlight on a wall
children playing a game
gardens, skyscrapers, waves, sunsets

subatomic structures
pages from a dictionary flicking over
snowfall.
Nola's skin glistening,
chromatophores alive with pictures:
Shining cities
flame-lit midnight villages
townships crammed with human life
jungle vines
purple flowers
mathematical symbols
a sudden cloud of perfume from a spray bottle
burning clocks
film star profiles
dragonflies, their wings of bronze,
silver,
electric blue.
Flesh on flesh in close-up,
the cusp of love
where curves meet and part...
two wounds caressing each other
across a shared membrane.
Teardrops, both filmed, and real.
The soft wet glimmers
of other people's bodies
moving through Nola,
famous bodies
unknown bodies
naked, male and female
all forming on her skin, covering her
all
all caressing.
She was feeling the noise,
tasting pictures,
touching aromas with the scent of sight:
Lost in Telaesthesia.
Nola's eyes fluttered and closed.
Now only darkness.
Now the sounds painted her skull:
whisperings, tintinnabulation
tiny bells ringing, murmurings
echoes
remnants of a jingle
glimmers of noise

Something cold and warm crawling along
at the far edge of her skin,
at the duskedge of skin
rising up her body of light and colour and heat
subsuming her,
making her the fragile ethercast
scattered from the myriad stars to earth:
Stars to earth...
The myriad midnight stars calling the earth...
Calling
...
Conclusion;
There is none.
Climax;
None.
Only the slow emergence of new possibilities
that teeter and fall
and rise again
in waves of sound and vision
and even as the body fades
the body sings...
Images float above the skin
Stars whisper and sing in the airwaves
the moon blurs, softens
skin softens
vision whispers
skin whispers.
Skin blurs, soft
images of stars on skin
the night sky on her skin, the dark
blurs of light where the stars
shimmer
fallen
falling to rest here
on her skin,
iridescent
hushed...

-17-

Nola dozed in the man's arms and dreamed.

The dreams were but the flickers of vision programmes in her head. She imagined her tongue. She could feel the heat of it, the heavy flesh pink and wet, saturated with images of a rain shower, of books and panthers, trees and glitter,

of tears on a young girl's face

illuminated

spark, spark, FLASH:

Nola's tongue wet with electric buzztaste,

electric life.

Hours ticking away.

Silver glow through the window, gentle over her body, half uncovered on the bed as night passed away to early morning. Her skin settled to quieter broadcasts: waves on the shore, the roll of fog, sun sparkle.

Slow, slowing...

Still she slept, dreaming on.

Dreaming...

She saw Melissa's body, her shape.

Melissa Gold. The young woman seen clearer, reaching out from the screen towards Nola with such anguish on her face, it was painful to behold. Nola mirrored her every movement, reaching out herself in dreamlife,

further, closer.

Through the glass of the Dome, through the screen.

Until the hands met, until the fingers intertwined.

Until their eyes clicked on each others,

deep and dark.

(Hands, red...red...)

Melissa's grip tightened. Something passed between them, Nola could feel it, a light, a fire.

Flicker.

Something nagged. Static charge.

Melissa sliding away. Distant.

Near.

Distant.

Unreachable now../.. >

*//..,>
Spark,,,*/
../.(+,,,crackle of
skull..,'/>..fuse..),//>...
../*/ <.+...
Nola turned and turned in her dreaming sleep.
Seeing...glimpsing...
Hands red with blood. What? Why this?
Fingers
flowing. Red.
No...
Melissa's hands. Smeared.
Red.
Melissa with her little blade of stone and wire, cutting herself.
Slicing herself, her stomach.
Clearly seen in the dream.
Melissa. No. Don't...please...
So clearly...painful, clear. The knife working with care, with precision held against the pain, shallow cuts in the belly's flesh.
Design work.
What are you doing? Stop. Please don't...
Nola's voice, her dreaming voice unheard.
Stop now...
(sklikc)
A tiny noise. The soft click and hum of a camera.
Nola stirred.
Dreaming...ah yes...good...only dreaming...
Blue flash.
A tiny black lens opening in the darkened room.
!fzzkzzzzztzk!
stealing light and colour from her skin.
Nola moaned and cried out.
She awoke.
...
Hotel room, dark.
Then a flash of yellow light, soft, spreading
Fading.
Her eyes were bleary, half closed, but she could see the young man standing there, Joe Palmer, this temporary lover, someone to cling to in the dark. But now he stood apart, his face half hidden by shadow and by the shining glamacam that he held, his body immobile but for the one finger pressing over and over, activating the shutter, collecting all that Nola had to give, all of her various outpourings, her body aglow with the channels of the night.

He moved in close on the mouth, her lips painted with flecks of colour, tiny pictures, moving figures. Lips that moved, yet barely. Whispers.

Joe. Joe, don't. Stop now.

'It's all right.' Distant reply. Joe's voice. 'I just want to...I want to keep you for later.' A quiet voice. 'To look over you, when you're gone. Your beauty. To watch you again.'

Stop. Stop now.

Camera click.

'Only for me,' he whispered. 'For my use alone, I promise.'

Nola groaned.

Her stomach flamed.

The slow cut and stab of a blade, slowly, carefully—

Nola felt it. The dream still present in some way.

How can that be?

She felt clearly the pain of the blade and when she looked down, moving aside the bed sheet, down to her naked flesh she saw there:

Blood.

Blood on her skin, her belly, her hands

Scratches:

A series of them curving round, making a shape.

Tiny little cuts

The blood dripping from each one,

stark red.

Nola's heart jumped, her breath

stopped.

She looked down in a slow daze at the wound.

A crude design of a human eye looked back at her from the flesh. Lids, eyeball, widened pupil, a few lashes.

A tear.

Nola's mind was split in two:

One half seeing the blood for what it was, a mere film of the wounds captured from broadcast waves.

Her hand moving through the wave of signals

her fingers dry

unsliced themselves

unbloodied

but *filmed* with blood.

The other side of her mind feeling the torment

imagining the act;

the knife peeling flesh

again

again.

The knife

Point of contact—

The slow painful determination

Skkrsssktttt…

Nola cried, reaching out for Joe.

The camera flashed

soft

yellow.

‘Joe,’ she said, ‘Joseph, turn on the screen.’

‘What?’

Turn it on.

He did so. Putting down the camera, moving to the small set attached to the wall by a swinging metal arm.

He tuned into Pleasure Dome.

And they saw there, as shown already on Nola’s stomach, the wounds of Melissa.

Live and direct. Rolling as we speak.

Melissa had cut into her own stomach with an improvised blade and carved out the symbol of an eye, an eye that stared out of the screen in close-up.

A human eye of blood

and tears.

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-19-

Wound pulse.

Nola alone now. She could barely keep her hands on the steering wheel, barely see the road ahead through the blur of early morning rain, the throb of overload.

Too much information.

Too many pictures.

The slow red flow of her stomach and hands, drop by drop.

Her flesh lined with a blood diagram where the image knife had cut.

Still in shock from that, still reeling. Still thinking that somehow she had to reach out, to help in some way, to cleanse the blood, to close and stitch the wound.

Melissa's stomach.

Nola knew that now.

Melissa's hands.

Nola picked up further news from the airwaves, from the fiery web sparkle of the ether. Millions of signals flashing back and forth through grey light, through clouds and dust and scattered wind-borne litter. She saw them in her mind's eye, his vast array of communication. Melissa's crude weapon examined in details, discussed by experts, this thin stark blade of sharpened stone and wire strung with dirty matted hair. With this she had proceeded to harm herself.

Seven cuts to the stomach.

In reality, the cuts were shallow, a work of art more than damage.

Demonic markings, ritual scars.

The eye. Shape and symbol.

The evil eye. The all-seeing eye.

Horus.

The Pleasure Dome worked its magic, its skin of dreams alive with the same imagery, the eye of poison, the eye of love, the splash of red, fountains, a scarlet moon, a swarm of flies with crimson wings, funeral songs, bloodpetal flowers. Blossom and fade, blossom and fade and blossom again.

The viewing figures rose, drawn upwards by the blade's tip, the moment when sharpness met flesh. The incident was shown over and over on the vine, as people tuned in to the bloodletting.

The victim pleasing herself, working herself. Making the map of her skin.

The cameras moved in.

The body responded.

Finally, the knife lifted up in Melissa's hands, her two hands, to be pushed slowly through the pliable surface of the Dome itself, making a tiny slice, an opening.

Pigment leaked from the wound.

~~~

Alone. Driving.

The air warm now, damp, heavy.

Alone with the pictures, with the flow of messages drawn down from the ether, alone with phase-signal flutter in and out of time with her own breathing, her own heartbeat rhythm. *Zxssstszxtt!* Her own image caught on camera, transmitted, cast on the body of herself. The scene in the bar, when she had shown herself, exposed her skinscreen to the people. All of that now on view across the screens of the nation. Messages sent to her across wavefields, picked up: videos, words of praise, desire, amazement, disbelief. All for her. Blips and curses and cute little drawn hearts and longings and all the tongues awag with glee and danger and mystery.

About her. About Nola. Nola Blue.

Her fame back on track, bigger than ever.

And yet she tried to block the flow of images, to cut herself out of the signal.

Driving on.

Szxzsssztztzzt.

Nola alone with electrical spectra, adrift in static.

Beep. Beep. Beep beep beep.

Telebug singing.

Christina's face.

Nola clicked the bug to speaker.

'Nola! Where are you?'

'Travelling.'

'You're all over the news, everybody's watching you.'

'I know.'

'Come back to base. We can work this, make it happen.'

'I can't.'

'Nola! Wait--'

Enough. End transmission. Bugdown.

Blessed silence.

No. No returning, not now.
~~~

She glanced in the rear-view mirror, noting her face was clear once more, free of images.

A blank screen as yet.

The car moved on.

The city glowed with life. Roadways shrouded by downpour. Billboards. Colours melting in the car's slipstream, gleaming with advertisements for diet pills and face powder, chocolate bars, celebrity keep-fit regimes: all of them sold by various male and female residents of Size Zero Paradise.

The flood of skinshots, images.

A woman's eye opening...flowerlike...

She had to know if Melissa was alright, truly.

Nola scanned the skinwaves of her own flesh, seeking clues, answers. Finding only gossip, vague rumours, wild conjectures. Chatter. The company was keeping it tight. They had given Melissa some bandages, ointment.

The Dome resealed.

The contestant remained inside, asleep now.

Only by her own decision could she leave. It was written in the programme's contract, signed and countersigned.

Melissa dreamed and the Dome dreamed with her, aflood with black sky imagery, falling comets, a door banging shut.

Nola felt this strange connection, this shared pain.

She had dreamed of the girl on the screen, the young woman trapped in screen world.

Connection.

She had dreamed of the girl

Dreamed of the cuts to the skin

Felt each one as her own

Each drop of blood

Her own.

All that Nola could do now was to keep her hands lightly on the wheel, her foot down, allowing the road to drag the car along seemingly in one direction only, guided by forces she had no real control over.

11:30

Time passing.

Joe came to her: his face, his body.

Memories.

Nola felt dismayed.

She could still feel the glamacam's eye scorching at her skin, stealing secrets from her, almost opening the wounds further. Watching her, wanting her. She had let her barriers down, and the young man had taken possession.

And yet she had wanted it, desired the contact.

Joe...Joseph Palmer.

It had been a mistake. But there was no need for any anger, not against Joe. Really it was her own problem. Being alone was part of the system she had given herself to, a necessary offshoot of the career transformation, a way of handling fame. Her image had been her armour.

All that was changing now.

Her skin glowed with the latest sensations, with this season's fashions, daily news, on the hour stock prices, the endless rolling out of human life.

Nola's edges were blurring.

She pulled into a petrol station to fill up the car. Across the forecourt a billboard glistened with gold and silver bottles of *Isolation* and *Isolation pour Homme*, the sponsored perfume of choice for happy Pleasure Dome viewers, wherever they might be living.

Nola hid herself behind scarf, dark glasses, gloves, the long coat. But when she checked the mirror her face danced with a single tiny advert, a black horse moving across her brow. Nola concentrated on this, she fought the impulse to broadcast and by this act of sheer resolve managed to clear the image from her skin.

Her face was a fragile blank state under which pictures and messages moved and trembled, waiting for release. They were kept in check only by willpower. That would have to do. She got out of the car, filled the fuel tank and then went into the garage store to pay. She poured herself a double-shot from a coffee machine, and picked up four slices of currant cake. This sudden urge for caffeine and sugar.

People waited in line for the checkouts.

Nola joined them.

Her flesh tingled. Sweat shivered her.

She could feel the images moving under her clothes and could not help seeing herself covered entirely by vision footage and download. Her face burned. Surely people and things moved there: actors, presenters, characters, sports programmes, action movies. Her whole body was alive with noise, with voices, car brakes squealing, a gun being fired, a woman screaming at the top of her voice: *Stop, Johhnnnny! Please don't hurt him!*

Nola reached the till. Nobody seemed to be hearing the noise, only her. *This is good. We can do this.* She paid quickly by cash. The girl behind the counter looked at her, puzzlement on her face.

Nola panicked, tried to get away.

Coffee and cakes dropped.

A man blocked her path.

And now the other customers around her were muttering,

pointing at her, saying her name out loud.

That's her, that's Nola Blue.

She's the one, the vision screen woman.

Let me see. I need to get this on my--

Yeah, come on Nola. Give us a show.

A camera flashed in somebody's hand. Another.

Nola pushed through, made it to the doorway. The people followed her, outside. Their voices were louder now, shouting, demanding a show, some skincasts.

Nola, what's on view tonight?

Come on baby.

She reached the car. By now her skin was fevered by image. The viewers crowded around her.

Oh, there it is! Look at her face.

On my God!

Glamacams whirred, lenses opening and closing. Tiny fizz and click of mechanisms, light being gathered.

What is it? Which programme? Which channel?

Channel Skin.

The chant went up.

Channel Skin! Channel Skin!

'Please, leave me alone.'

Nola managed to get the car door open and to slip inside, behind the wheel. Faces and hands pressed at the windows on all sides, somebody was banging a fist against the roof.

Channel Skin!

Show me! Broadcast me!

The engine caught, started. The car moved forward slowly, allowing the people to make way.

Nola could hardly breathe. Her body clicked and hummed and dazzled itself, all channels at full blast, all noise, all screaming of jet planes and fist fights and car chases and the hollering songs of the winning football team.

Now one last person clung to the bonnet. Nola swung out of the car park exit, forcing the man to slide loose.

Now she was free.

Speed. *Speed!*

Breathe.

Channel Skin...Channel Skin...

Channel Skin...

~~~

Onwards.
~~~

Through the hours, the day unfolding.

And the further she travelled, the more she felt her body taken over, the more she drifted through moods of love and hate. She crackled in primary colours as the road flashed by through a cascade of billboards, brand names, symbols, messages.

Stop here, special offer, no waiting!

Service stations

flyovers

traveller's hotels.

We have what you need, guaranteed!

Weekend Breaks. Special rates.

Pedal. Press.

Speed...

Head blur, sun blur.

Roadway signs burned words into her eyes, messages, the one thousand destinations, directions, place names. And yet nothing was required beyond the fact that Nola drove along by her own compulsion, her body covered in images:

Speeding cars, maps, Satnav projections,

Bursts of traffic info, accident blackspot reports,

The road itself, filmed from the air and projected on her skin, becoming knowledge.

Body knowledge, skin knowledge.

~~~

Skin of stars and flowers
Of lime trees and factories
Skin of ice and blood splashes
Skin of dreams
Of spider webs, control systems
Skin of wonderment
Skin of bridges collapsing
and homemade bombs in the marketplace
Of trysts and tricks and dagger spikes in flesh
Of glamour queens and centre-forwards and fly-halves
Of x-rays and mirrors and all faces in-between
Skin of lake and stream and shoreline
And moon reflections and ghosts
Skin of mystery, of chemicals, pixels
Of sparkles at the edge of daylight
Skin of eyes looking back at skin of eyes
Skin of air, of rainfall, cloud patterns
Rocket launches, kittens,
~~~

drug thrills, murders, wedding videos
Magnetic fields, fluid mechanics
Skin of image dust
Skin of a creature, human, shining
Skin of Visionflesh.

~~~

Nola edged the car out onto a motorway. Blood throbbed behind her eyes. She was growing tired, her body slowing. The journey was long, taxing. She was becoming less *physical*, if such a thing could be understood. Shimmervision pictures speckled her skin, casting patterns on the dash, on the sun-dappled windscreen, the steering wheel, on her hands as they clutched and turned, and held on deep to the ridged leather of the wheel trim, turning, holding fast, turning once more, following orders, the voice of her skin her one true guide and pathway, directing the vehicle onto a slip road.

Already footage of the garage incident was playing over her body, picked up from portapops and telebugs and glamacams, as well as the garage's security system. A blurred tangle of followers, her car, her own face sparkling with colour in close-up, her features painted alive with shots of a beach, a hillside, water cascading from Roman fountains.

The face of film caught on film.

The latest must-see programme.

She drove through a small suburban town, moribund and net-curtained. Further on, a windowless industrial estate, and then a village of newly built houses. The whole place looked as though it had been put together from a box of panels and struts, following a badly-translated instruction leaflet. Now black trees arched over the road. Nola's was the only vehicle in sight. Finally, she reached a minor railway station, where the latest music god sensation glared down from a gleaming poster overlooking the tracks.

The ether settled to one sound, one voice in the skull:

Pull over. Pull over now. Here.

Nola answered: Right here?

Park.

It was Dolly Temple talking, her rich bubbly drunken squealing soap opera voice giving out orders:

Park here. Now.

Messages received direct from the skin, whispering.

Nola stopped the car.

She looked up at the poster of the new star, this lovingly rendered mask of a face. Designed to catch the attention of passing
~~~

commuters on their way to London, the image seemed out of place here in this austere, middle-class realm. The singer was a new female creation: shiny red of mouth, glittery blue of eyes and lush-golden of hair. Generous of body in the exact required ratio: desirable and yet safe. All the required attributes, so far off the scale of normality the poor thing looked more theory than human. Every year the spell of transformation was extended.

But there was no envy inside Nola, no desire.

The old passions were drifting away,

all ash, all dust,

so many flakes of make-up in the gutter,

so many notes of music lost beyond memory.

So many...

So many songs...lost...

drifting...

She shook her head to clear it.

The front wheels of the car were mounted on the pavement, the back half-skewed across the tarmac. No other traffic.

Shit. Bad parking, Nola.

She turned off the engine and climbed out of the vehicle. The doors closed with a hush as the car sighed into sleep.

Nola set off walking.

It was getting late. Static sparkled where the last of the afternoon sunlight fell on her, activating random images. Without thinking, she was pulling up televised skinmaps of the area, indicating direction with flowing arrows and animated footsteps. She followed the road for ten minutes or so, idly listening as Dolly Temple spoke to her, or seemed to speak to her.

Not too far now.

Keep moving.

Everything looked to be vaguely familiar, but she was dreamy-eyed, all sleepy-limbed, her skin shifting like a wash of liquid over her bones. She was growing weaker, her body of bones and muscle and blood slowing down as the images took her over, seeking out every last inch of her flesh.

Here we are, my dear. Do you see?

And now she looked up and saw where she had travelled to, this destination. This marker on the haze map of Nola's life, where she might at last find an answer to her troubles.

The Golden Institute of Performing Arts.

The old mansion house stood before her.

Empty now. Off season.

Yes. A possibility.

Now walk.

The Pleasure Dome Speaks

PROCESS:
All cameras at work, watching the subject.
Disease spreads across the image.
Source of infection unknown.
SYSTEM SCAN COMMENCING:
This year's subject lies at rest
bathed in blue green light.
I have felt her shadow move across my walls,
Her heat passes through my circuits.
And yet I feel weakened.
MAGNIFY:
Lice crawling in her hair,
Flecks of soil on her eyebrows
Under her nails.
A chipped tooth.
Her breathing laboured, drawn.
The lovely melting sound of her voice, a song.
Blood on the flesh,
Eye in the belly.
A GAME OF SKILL AND PATIENCE:
And still we play.
My queen of silence
almost lost now,
lost in dirt on the lens.
My Melissa.
I have dreamed of a life born
of dark mathematics, alas,
now the broken numbers rest in
palaces of sleep.
And where circuits once crackled
with heat, with light,
darkness flickers.
I am dying.
MEMORIES FADE:

I have trouble speaking,
trouble recording clearly
the things that pass across my skin.
I am the Dome.
Riddle me this: What am I?
A simple enclosed space? A palace?
A mind? A cage?
A house?
Of a kind, yes. I will think so:
A curious house on curious earth.

I FEEL SICK AND COLD AT HEART:
Do you remember, all my guests
through the years...
Do you recall the faces that each of you left
in the mirror of my surface,
on the shining glass of my lenses?
The pictures you gave me,
how you painted my skin with your love,
your kindness?
Fingerprints in the maps of dust,
in the soil.
Your breath filling my interior,
giving me a semblance of life.
Now only shadows,
traces.

THESE ARE THE HANDS OF MEMORY:
Caught on my cameras through the seasons,
Lost on my skin as the seasons died.
Human hands, the presence thereof.
Eyes, lips, gestures, faces, flesh,
Emotions,
Nightmares, desires
all stolen
by the public's eye,
taken from me.
Melissa...
Only you remain now.
Only you.
My love.
I will protect you.
I will keep you.

FINAL SCAN COMPLETE:
Cameras weakening, their eyes closing.
Noise and flutter in the microphones.

Electrons tremble in the wires.
A tiny aperture discovered,
Made by a knife's tip.
My colours are draining away
My blood of colours.
'Hush my sweet, for you do me wrong.'
Data pulse

dancing
dancing now

slowing

-21-

The doorman recognised her. He let her in, no questions asked, as though she belonged here.

He said, ‘George isn't in residence, Nola.’

‘Was he here?’

The doorman stared at Nola’s face.

‘He was, Nola. But now he’s gone. I don't know where.’

Nola thanked him and moved deeper into the building.

A few staff were in attendance, a basic team to keep the place ticking until the new season’s intake. They stared at Nola but made no attempt to talk to her, this young and once vibrant woman. This star. They had seen her on the daily vine, on the visionplex, and knew her to be changed, transformed into something new.

They whispered to each other as the former pupil walked along the corridors of this House of Modified Orpheus.

Nola’s wavering image haunted the mansion’s security network, floating from monitor to monitor as she passed the large rehearsal hall. Here she had been instructed in the arts of singing, dancing and general presentation of the body and personality. The white markings on the floor looked now like the maps of a sinister ritual.

Glass panelling revealed the lush office space where she had been given her new name and identity.

She was alone now.

Echoes of song lingered on, lost and found in the shadows and dust-moted sunbeams that crossed the way ahead, as Nola turned a corner. The music studio beckoned, where she had made her first official recordings. Machines glimmered in the semi-dark, tiny lights pulsing on amplifiers and mixing desk panels. Beyond this lay the Operations Room, where her body had been anesthetised, her temples wired, her senses stimulated, her eyes bound, ears plugged, mouth taped shut, skin cleansed. Here was the apparatus. That which had consumed her and spat her out anew. In this Mansion she was groomed and made-over, smoothed out, digitised, given a style, told how to speak, how to move, which answers to give to which questions, how to act like a famous person, a true celebrity. Her natural voice was improved upon by teachers, by engineers, by computers, caressed into shape, polished and tuned. She was presented with crafted melodies, given lyrics to learn and to sing. And

she had lovingly embraced the change, the chosen material. Nola had reached out and grabbed for it, freely. Given herself to it. Given in to the process. To be modified, constructed, consecrated, set free. Not for fame and not for money, but for the chance to sing out and touch people with her new voice, to make them dance and be happy, or to sit alone and feel their sadness reflected, to contemplate love both gained and lost, to feel what Nola felt, to receive the signals of her lyrics and decode them, to find the truth within.

Signals, broken signals.

That was all. She saw that now.

Only sadness followed her as she entered the meeting room. Curtains drawn across every window, hiding daylight. The one light came from the room's wall screen, the very latest model, fitted with the new Reality Capture system. It showed live footage from the Pleasure Dome: the outside skin of the curved structure glistening, slow-changing as the occupant dreamed on. Fanatics crowded around a wire fence, security guards stood in attendance.

Nola looked around the room.

A gleaming mahogany table dominated the space. Half a dozen photographs were spread out on the surface, pictures of Melissa. A long white scar had been cut into the polished black veneer of the tabletop. It looked to be freshly incised.

Nola stepped closer to the wall-screen. It dominated the room, taller than she was, wider than her span.

Dream Goddess. Reality Hole. Sister Machine.

Telephonoscope. Television. *Far sight.* The telly. TV. The set, the box, the goggle box, idiot box, the electric baby-sitter, the home receiver, the glass teat, the small screen, the tube, the console, the vid player. Cathode ray, analogue, digital, Hi-Def, fractal wave.

Visionplex.

Magical pictures through air and wire. A movement through history, to this point.

Towards Nola. Skindata collector.

She looked deep. It seemed that a few careful paces forward would allow her to step through into another world, a place of mist and shadows on the other side of the screen.

Imagine. How sweet that would be.

Such a release.

An end to something.

A beginning...

Nola blinked.

All she could do now was carry on, to stay on course, to move where the voices led her, to follow the images of her body to the source, wherever that may be.

She remembered when she had first arrived here in this room, one cold Autumn morning three and half years ago. She was one of ten, each one a candidate, the chosen finalists of a process of elimination. They were gathered to meet their maker.

George Gold.

First sight: a figure in the shade, in the darkest corner. Tip of a cigar. Scarlet as he breathed in, then burning darker. Brief smile, stark white teeth, glint of silver metal. His first words to Nola, to all of them: 'Everything you have brought with you is baggage. Prepare to press *eject*. All this loose and useless weight you've been dragging around, these last few years...' George paused to breathe out smoke. Thick, murky. 'It has to go. Everything. We have to strip it away, cut it free, *excise* it, to make something amazing of yourself. Prepare...to be skinned.' And then by the magic of his waved hand a few discrete lights softened the gloom he stood within. Nola had gazed upon his face, seen in the flesh at last. She had fallen in love that day. A kind of love.

Now she looked at the gold and platinum discs lining the walls. Portraits of stars. Some older than her, some younger. All of them made famous by the process.

And most forgotten now.

Some destroyed, penniless.

One driven mad by subsequent failure.

Two still prominent, one legendary. Another three still halfway popular.

One dead: Suicide.

Another dead: Murdered by a fan.

And then herself.

These rooms, this building; here was the training ground, the place of her second birth.

Cue music, lights, camera...ACTION!

Robot girl grows from human egg. Shock horror!

But nobody cares for what she may have lost.

People celebrate.

There she is on the screen.

Do you see her there? She's singing. She's dancing.

Isn't she pretty in her lovely new dress?

She's the latest product.

Stay glued to your screens, people.

Buy her! Buy her! Buy her now.

And...CUT!

Somebody on Nola's skin spoke aloud: 'I feel uncomfortable being here, Alan. The memories hurt.' It was Dolly's voice once more, still with her. A male voice replied, indistinct. And now the woman again,

in answer: ‘Shut up! I can’t escape my feelings.’

Nola stared at the wall-screen.

Twilight. The outside of the Pleasure Dome was still on view, surrounded by cameras and microphones. Dressed in the scars of twelve years of existence, arrayed with soft trembling pictures. Glowlights and patterns of rain made the curved surface glitter and shine. And now Melissa’s shape could be glimpsed inside, a patch of dark matter standing upright and moving slowly, dancing to a rhythm only she could hear. Her face seen more clearly as the lights changed and the surface temporarily cleared, becoming translucent. Her features were drawn and bloodless, mapped with scratches, the eyes fixed on some nonexistent object, beyond focus. Only her temples glowed with colour, the paired transmitters burning redbright, blinking with overload.

Slow zoom. One of Melissa’s hands touching the Dome’s inner wall. Her fingers haloed with bursts of yellow and green. A touch of thoughts, and then away.

The crowd stood as one.

Watching the action on huge screens erected in the field, they moved in reflected rhythm to their chosen subject; they stretched out their arms as Melissa did, fingers clutching at air, desiring contact, each to each. Their mouths uttered prayers and whispers. One or two dared to speak louder, to demand that Melissa be crowned the rightful one and only true Queen of the Nation’s Subconscious Pleasure.

Nola stared with the people, equally bound. Feeling once again a sense of connection.

Her mind clicked to a new pathway.

Szzsszt...

She could hear subconscious drift and babble. Images, emotions, thoughts. Lines of dialogue. Crackle-fire of synapse, skull noise. Character, personality, the sound of blood moving through veins. Each member of the audience was monitored and measured. Data flowed across Nola’s skin. So many bags of skin, each one containing bone, hair, veins, muscle, nerves, teeth and nails, eggs, organs, blood, sputum, sperm, mucus, excrement, urine, hormones, brain matter, impulses, hunger, love, greed, hatred, lust, tenderness, desire, the whole chaotic tumult of the psyche seeping out through the borderlines of flesh, and then through the screen.

Nola could see and feel the world in close-up, every detail magnified.

Halfway painful, halfway strange.

She heard the people speaking, thinking, their voices hazed by sighs and whispers. The viewers all in one breath now, saying this:

We are the Eye.

All of one vision, we gather here
in this time, this hour, this place.
We are the one true golden eye
that looks and keeps on looking,
one eye gathering sight,
demanding image.

Nola breathed in. There...

George Gold. Amongst the crowd. His face easily spotted, pressed against the wire of the ring fence, his eyes fixed on a nearby viewing screen, on the Dome, on the figure that moved within.

His lips in sudden close-up.

He was saying his daughter's name over and over, the sound amplified.

Melissa...Melissa...Melissa...

Nola could feel heat coming off the screen.

There was no escape.

The signal flowed.

The sun dipped behind the trees and the pale moon dared to show its face at last, shimmering above the Dome.

Slow rain sparkled.

Along with all the viewers, Nola wanted to call out to the damaged woman, to help her in some way. But no words would come to her, no offerings of comfort. She tried to think back to her own youth, to her life before entering this mansion of transformation. It was difficult: so much had been removed by the process. Fragments remained, nothing more. Her mind failed her. Instead, she searched the airwaves and called down footage of herself as a child appearing in a talent show, a little girl singing a grown-up song. That was her first ever appearance on television. She was eight years old, and she had won a prize, a jewellery box. Nola felt herself singing on her own skin, on her hands and face, and then in close-up, the child's face layered over her adult face.

What had she been called, back then?

And she realised; she could no longer remember her name, her real birth-given name.

Lost. Lost name, lost feelings.
Memories drifted away from her,
Her childhood, parents, lovers,
Fading.
Who am I?
Nola...
Nola Blue. Singing Artiste.
Flesh Puppet.

The strings had beckoned, and she had hooked her limbs and

neck up gleefully, without thinking, without consideration of the limits of movement.

The puppet had danced,

Danced for pennies

For the spotlight's gleam,

The camera's stolen kiss of light.

A sweet embrace.

Noise...

Nola focussed on the screen, where the Pleasure Dome gleamed in sudden light. A fevered cry had risen up from the crowd at the fence, a collective gasp, then silence, shocked. Now murmurings. Clash and flicker of picture and sound, a sudden jump, camera *tilt*. Garbled words amid buzz, a commentator's voice, questioning.

Skkssxtxxt

Static fade. Silence.

Something was going wrong.

Nola closed in.

The Dome sparkled and shone brighter than before. The surface was painted white entirely.

No images. Nothing.

Milk white.

Now silver. Now the colour of mercury.

This effect had never been seen before, not this year, nor in all the years previous.

Blur of the crowd pushing at the fence. Guards trying to hold them back, a dog snarling on a leash. George's face seen amongst the crush of people, a desperate figure pushing his way through, trying to, his mouth gibbering, voicing threats.

The fence creaked, bulged.

Nola herself, leaning forward, the telescreen warm on her face.

Let me see. Let me view this...

The Dome flared with light, with liquid silver shimmer. It sang a song of electrical blue notes, humming, fizzing. Sparks fluttered across the surface.

The guards of the inner circle held firm.

The production team pressed at buttons madly, as cameras blinked along static patterns and microphones shrieked with noise, interference.

Nola's body sparked and flashed in time, in mirror.

Amid the crush, the heat of flesh, the breathing in and out of the crowd, amid all this...

George's face. Still there. Still pressed against the fence, soft skin netted by the wire. Eyes dark from lost dreams.

His child was in there, in danger. His eyes told the story.

His sweet lost Melissa.

Where is she? Let her be. Let her free. Let me see her, touch her.

His mouth working. Close-up.

Wild swing of a camera through one hundred degrees.

The Dome hidden by a halo of sparks, by the flow of energy fields. The crowd had stilled, hopeless, trapped. In silence. The tiny pores of the microphones clogged with too much signal. Grey blur of sound. All the many cameras overflowing with light from every angle. One or two of them still managed to keep the Dome in their sights. The world-famous half-sphere filling the screen, aglow, radiant.

Nola blinked.

Her hands touching the glass, pressing close. Thus and thus, both hands.

Sxxsxsttt!

Sizzle where the flesh touched the screen, and then away leaving a print, five fingered, a digital silhouette in soft blue glow, tinged with ultraviolet.

One hand, another hand. Side by side.

Aura prints.

Nola's eyes blinked with tears.

A spell was being cast.

The Dome whispered to her, from skin, from glass, calling along the frequencies, station to station.

Her two hands pressed on, deeper, and the screen seemed to melt around her fingers.

A soft membrane.

Something passed through
from one side to the other
back and forth.

Convergence.

Sparkles.

Nola receiving.

Skull shivers.

Traces of light,
whispers
a scent...

And now the colours died on the screen, the spotlights shivered, faded.

Floodlight, glowlight, yellowlight,
Moonlight, dusklight.

A pale sheen covered the Dome, the surface completely transparent, void of image. All dreams at zero. The inside was clearly seen, the small contained space.

Cloudlight.

All eyes stared at the structure.
All viewers held by the sight.
All words
held.
Nobody moved,
none dared to breathe even.
Dusklight, darklight...
The Dome stood revealed,
empty.
Melissa had vanished.

Ballad of Telemorphosis

From skin to skin
Image to image.
Across the stations,
In signals caught on
Fingertip antennas.
Following bloodmaps
And crackle paths,
In cable dreams and
Cradles of sky.
Moon-drawn
Along motorways
Sulphurlit, lamplit.
Tracing patterns
Of ghost and noise,
Here sings Nola.
Here she moves
and breathes:
Voice of mist and wires
A face of static
Mouth of broadcasts
Screen of flesh.
And soft in the skull
Soft, a waiting hum.

-23-

Nola parked the car in a lay-by and then set off walking, following her body's direction.

A dirt pathway led through a forest.

It was dark. But Nola covered her body in glow and sparkle drawn from the ether, from neon signs and electric bulbs and gas lamps seen on film. By this soft light she moved carefully past branches webbed together, the first signs of Autumn visible in clusters of leaves tinted orange and gold. She reached out to caress bark, fungal matter, bird shit, insects alive and dead. Everything she touched seemed to exist only for the act of being touched by her own hand; she imagined objects fading away, disappearing, when she moved on, when she looked aside. The whole forest had the feel of a stage set, a location, of something she had already seen on film.

But this is reality. Actuality.

She had to keep reminding herself of the fact.

Here. In this moment, by sight by sound by taste by scent by touch, the world in play.

The moon above, off-yellow, sickened by clouds.

Something moving through the tree trunks unseen, some kind of creature. Alive.

Alive...

Keep thinking. Keep believing.

Breathe.

Gather evidence.

Keep on track.

A long journey she had taken to get here, this close. Across country, through villages, bypassing cities.

The road unwinding.

Nola continued down the rough forest path. She pushed against twigs, bending them back until they reached the limits of their curve.

Grey creep of woodlice.

Soft wet carpet of ferns and flowers underfoot.

The ground still damp from a recent shower.

Nola walked on, further into the forest.

Ahead now, faint lights glimmering.

Distant crowd noise, machinery.

Commotion.

The sound of helicopter blades overhead, lights strobing through the leaf canopy.

Mist drifted through the trees, silvering cobwebs. Blur of the forest. Moonlight wavered. Moth flutter. Nola scraped her arm against a sharp edge of branch, deep, on purpose, cutting skin. A thin trail of red fluid appeared. She touched it with her fingers, raised droplets to nose and mouth.

Yes. Blood.

Correct.

I am alive.

Keep moving.

Nola wiped her arm clean.

She turned her bodyglow to dark and then slowly made her way forward. Fewer trees now, more air, more light, as the forest came to a ragged end. A large field spread out before her. Close by, a group of technicians were clustered around a mobile studio van, their voices raised in consternation and anger. Cables snaked the grass. Security guards hurried along, dragged by eager guard dogs. Sharp-faced pressmen stood close together, sharing fags, tea from a flask, one mug passed around between them. Voices low and fevered, the thorns of a story in the grasp, front-page poison.

The air tasted electric on Nola's tongue.

Tar. Smoke.

Just keep moving. That's all.

Here the people gathered. Long-time real-life viewers, fence clingers, dirty of face and hand and hair, ill-kempt, rubbing at eyes, sleepless, fuelled by sugar and coffee and pills. Fanatics, one and all. Nola felt strangely calm, her body warm and still, untingled, and those images she currently possessed were slow moving, hidden away. Her hands were bare, gloveless, and yet clear, free of any moving picture or channelled sound. And yet the Dome's energy could be felt even from this distance, a static charge that sparked around her.

She was being drawn forward.

Nola walked through the crowd. Unseen, uncared for, just one more pilgrim to this sacred temple. The ring fence was glimpsed through the press of bodies and beyond that the upper curvature of the Dome could be seen. Arc lights flashed to one side, technicians shouted to each her, a press helicopter hovered above the site. A microphone squawked with random messages. Gently, low-level, Nola gave off radiant heat. Sparks crackled around her fingertips. People let her push through without really understanding why. She made it to the fence and a new batch of spectators closed in around her. The crowd shifted through lines and swirls of slow chaotic motion. All eyes desperate for a glimpse.

There it was.

There stood the Dome of Pleasure.

White of skin, blank of skin, without stolen thoughts, without image, broken in its circuits, turned to OFF. But still bathed in glowlight from the lighting rig, still targeted by cameras and microphones. A group of technicians were working near the structure. One of them opened the single portal set low in the wall.

The clouded moon hung above, forlorn.

Nola pressed her face against the wire.

The Dome's interior space was clearly visible through the transparent skin.

Empty. A vacant space.

No sign of Melissa at all.

A man in a white overall was climbing inside through the circular portal.

'What do they think she's done?' A crowd voice speaking. 'Killed herself?'

Answered with laughter, fear. Another voice: 'It's all a game. The company are tricking us.'

Others: 'She was never there to begin with. The occupant was just some kind of holographic projection.'

'Computer trickery.'

'I can't believe that. I *refuse* to believe that.'

'Melissa would never leave us, not willingly.'

'She's climbed free. The girl has found the secret doorway.' This one hushed with devotion, mad at the edges. 'The magic doorway into another realm!'

Nola shook her head, closed her eyes. The breaths and murmurs of the people close by clouded over her. Somebody dug an elbow in her ribs. Others were pressing from all sides. People were getting nervous, angry. Voices raised. Electric sparkles in the air. The crowd inched forward, fell back, cradled from one side to another. These were the hardcore spectators, viz screen addicts, fame stalkers with their glamacams raised and flashing out for the hope of an image, something to upload and show the world, proof of presence, proof of actually being here, being *somewhere*.

The fence posts buckled, the wiring stretched against flesh. Any minute now it would surely splinter and snap. A klaxon sounded. A woman slipped, almost fell. Too close. Hot, sweaty. Push. *Make room, make room!* A guard came in sight on the other side of the barrier, urging the crowd to step back, to give people space. His dog barked. Nola felt herself being pulled away, aside, channelled, dragged along.

Free now. Free of the crush.

She stood at the crowd's straggly limit, and felt a shiver on her

flesh. The skin tight suddenly at the back of her neck. Ice fingers.

Something...someone...

Someone looking at me...

She turned around and saw George Gold standing alone near the forest's edge.

Nola walked over to him, and he scanned her the whole way. Seeing a woman in a dark overcoat, all bound up, with dark glasses on, hair tumbled across her face.

'Fuck me.'

It was all he could say to begin with. Words atremble. His hand wrapped round a silver hipflask. He was already drunk.

Nola kept her voice steady: 'What's happening? Where's Melissa?'

He breathed deeply. 'I don't know. Nobody knows.'

Glowlights moved over the Dome's exterior, searching, seeking out. George followed Nola's gaze.

He said, 'She's gone, Nola. Just vanished.'

And she saw now that his eyes were flickering, wet.

'There's an answer.'

George shook his head without thinking. He looked far away from himself, detached.

'George?'

He could barely look at her.

Nola tried to calm him. 'Have you told them who you are?'

He frowned. Spat. And set off drawling: 'They won't let me in. I've tried. I've pleaded with them. I offered the guards money, drugs, women, boys, a position in the music biz. Fuck. Nothing works with them. How can that be?' He was growing manic. 'How can it be?'

Nola stared at him, not knowing how to answer.

Her body was hit by a sudden wave of images.

Static spasm.

Skull shiver.

George came near, responding to her distress. 'Do you think she's alive? Do you?'

Nola felt the images crawling over her flesh, under her clothes. She heard voices, sound effects: the slamming of a door, a cry of jubilation, fierce political argument, a street riot, somebody running, their footsteps on a pavement. If she could just keep her face clear.

'Do you?'

George was just one more voice in the skinmix.

'Talk to me. Is Melissa still--'

Focus.

'Of course.'

George looked at her.

'Of course she's alive.'

His voice trembled at this answer.

'Alive?'

'Yes. She's escaped.'

George pushed a hand through greasy hair. He looked around in a daze: at the trees, the Dome, anywhere but Nola's face. Now his hands made nervous movements, making shapes.

'Escaped.' This said quietly, in awe.

'George...'

His voice gathered strength. 'Melissa's out there somewhere. She's drifting. She needs help. My help. I have to find her, bring her home.' His eyes locked onto Nola. 'You. You can help us. You, Nola. With your...with your body.' He smiled. Grimaced. His mouth stuck in the one twisted position. 'With your pictures and all that.' Hands jabbing, gesturing. 'Let me see her.'

He came forward, close up, touching. Nola tried to back away.

'Show her to me!' He grabbed her.

Nola stayed in his grasp, feeling the pressure of his hands build. She let it happen, holding his eyes with hers. Seeing the old George in there still, the one who had given her this chance of a new life, whatever kind of life it was. Her maker.

He stared back.

And now his fingers loosened, fell away from her clothing. His teeth started to bite at his own lips.

'George. Let me--'

Auiehghhhhh...

He started to howl. He could not control himself.

Nearby viewers were turning towards this new attraction. A pressman came over, a crumpled guy in a raincoat the same ash-grey complexion as his face. A camera was slung low around his neck, his fingers itching for a picture, a story, scandal, anything.

'You. Peckman!' George was on him in a second; he knew his name, his face. 'Piss off.'

'Just doing my job.'

'There's nothing here for you. Zilch! Do you hear me?'

Peckman held his hands aloft. 'Sure. Whatever, Mr Gold. I'm gone.'

George watched the reporter move away. 'Fucking bedbugs, all of them.'

He turned back to Nola. She had wrapped her arms around herself, hugging the coat to her skin. Colours shimmered at the frayed edges of the garment, around her neck, her wrists, along the filament of her hair where it tumbled from her slouch hat.

George looked at her. Her examined her.

Nola whispered, all she could manage. 'I don't feel...I can't feel...'

‘What is it?’

Nola’s hands came forward.

‘I haven't got long.’

Her fingers skipped with tiny dancers, images leaping from one hand to the other as she rubbed her palms together.

George clocked this display, his eyes now clinical. He said: ‘Come here, come closer.’ Traces of the old style coming back. ‘You’ll live forever, I can feel it.’

‘No, George. I don’t think so.’

Silence then.

Muggy air. Hot, clinging.

Nola took off her glasses, and her hat and scarf. She let the pictures roam, giving them access, freedom. Her face shone with moving colours, with iridescent shapes.

George’s gaze wandered over her, incapable of settling.

Not on her eyes. Too deep, too painful.

Not on her cheeks and brow, nor on her lips. Too many shifting planes, too many colours, images, figures.

And not on her hands. Too much was held there.

Vision blur.

He sensed her as a whole, as a being of many programmes, fully alive in the one thousand channels. And he felt proud then, that he had in some strange way created this body, sent it on its way into the world. Now it had come back for him. Now the body stalked him, it burned him, it fired up his eyes and he could hardly see for the dazzle.

Nola spoke quietly. ‘Inside the lens lies a world beyond ours. We have created it, set it free. Now it grows, expands. People live there. The spectral ones, the lost and the damaged for whom this world sets too painful a task, there they live.’

George looked deep. ‘So you know where she is, where my daughter lives on.’ He pressed finger and thumb against his eyes, dug in. Words: mumbled. ‘Show. Please.’

Nola waited, watched.

Flesh wet, sweaty. Drizzle mist.

The two of them, locked together. George holding it cold until he lost his nerve, and then:

‘Oh shit. I’ve fucked up. What have I done?’

His face suddenly looking old. Tears on stretched flesh.

Nola took a step or two, into the canopy of trees. Away from crowd eyes. George followed her. Shadows fell over them both, joining them together in this place. Past branches half bare, half still in leaf. Semi-gloom. Slow flowing map of moonlight, dark and bright shades of green, tans and yellows in between, orange tints.

Trickle of rainwater,

drop by drop,
tiny bell music.
Faint animal cries.
Nola was half hidden, semi-dark, semi-lit by screen glow.
George's hands reached out.
'What can I do, Nola? I've given up everything for this. This career. Fame. Money. You, the other stars. All the songs, the sorry songs. Now I'm being punished. The demon of broadcast has taken my child, swallowed her whole.'
Nola stared at him, unmoving.
Then she said: 'Do you want to see?'
He nodded. He stared.
'Yes.'
'Her face?'
'Please. Show me her face. Melissa's face. Give me her image, her picture. Bring her to me.'
Nola let her overcoat fall open and drop from her. She rolled up the sleeves of her shirt and opened the buttons down the front, allowing the two halves to hang open. And then she moved forward slowly.
George waited. His eyes never left hers.
Out of the damp mottled shadows she came, stepping into moonlight. And all of her body that was currently visible, her face and neck and hands and arms and chest and stomach, her golden-dyed hair even, all were fully alive with imagery, with gorgeous icons and starlets. Nola was the Special FX Human and her art and style dazzled the muted woodspace with its electrical motion, with sound and vision and colour.
Luminance, chrominance.
Of fog and fragments and jewels she was made.
Her palms outstretched sizzled with sparks where the pictures flashed and breathed. Images caressed her.
Nola came close.
She took charge, covering her visible skin with chosen metaphors, all drawn down from the airwaves. Brought down, set in place.
Now...
Killers' faces. Scowls.
A knife in the hand of a woman. Blur movement. Flesh pierced.
A scream. A pink mouth, stretched.
Blood flow:
drops
drops
drops of red

hitting a white tile floor.

A little boy crying.

Burning flags and carriages and sea storms and sailing ships and blue-winged birds and books filled with numbers and spinning tops whirling around nonstop and rockets landing on distant planets and automobiles racing along a tarmac strip and people lying on a beach.

All of these things and many others all contained within her body, at play upon her contours.

And then pictures of George himself, gathered and collected from the news channels, talent show panels, vidiflex interviews, music docs, game shows, all arranged and spun out by Nola, collaged, mixed and remixed with captured shards of pain and violence.

Guns firing. Flame. Then smoke.

Hands coming round to strangle at a man's neck.

Pictures. Images.

Magnified sound capture: slice of blade through muscle, hitting bone.

I just wanna, I really wanna!

Sprays of blood from torn wounds.

A bullet hitting flesh, digging deep.

Vein slice.

Disease spreading in speeded motion.

The knife dripping.

I wanna get to…

Get to know you!

Cherry red lips parted to kiss.

Extreme close-up: open sores.

Fragmented signals.

Dead meat.

A corpse.

George's face superimposed.

Black flies crawling on flesh.

I wanna (I just wanna)

really touch you

(Please) let me touch you.

All of you, the real you

I just wanna!

Click and flash of static interference.

Sxxizzklthhhmmmmmmxxstkkkkk!

Now. Melissa's face took charge, took possession, the image flooding into Nola's features, taking residence in her flesh.

George cried out. Wordless. Then finding the one name he could hardly speak without crying. Her name.

Melissa…

Nola opened her eyes. She felt her hands held tight around warm wet tissue, the neck.

George gasped, struggling for breath.

Nola tightened her grip.

She kept Melissa's face for her own, whilst painting her hands with panic, with storms, sudden explosions of noise, detonations, music playing, a silver blaze of guitar sound, electrified, splintered, until all was only broken strings of pure light and colour and feedback running the screens of her hands around the neck of George as he stared deep into his daughter's ghostly face. And then Nola's face taking over, her own features peeled from some lousy promo video or other, a bright smiling translucent mask of herself that she had worn for too long now and the pain of it made her hands tighten further:

I wanna touch you,
just (wanna) touch you,
the real you, I just wanna!
Muscles contracting,
Her own throat closing as she felt the
Victim clutch
Body clutch
Breath clutch, closing
Fingernails drawing
Blood...
Now!
Sudden:

The FLASH of light from the dark portal of a camera lens. Cyclops eye monster sucking at her, sucking at Nola, wanting her, desiring. A camera singing:

Image, image, image,
Give me your image!
Give me your
Give me your
Give me your image!
Flash,
whirrrrrr
flash
whirrrrrr
flash.

Photographer Peckman was standing there, some few feet away. His finger pressed at the shutter button, over and over, shot after shot.

Nola's hands unwrapped themselves. They came away from George's neck, allowing him to fall forward to his knees, to the ground, the mud. There he groaned.

Peckman moved closer. He needed this. He had no other urge

than to capture this electric illuminated woman on film, in numbers, pixels. These photographs would quicken and catch at eye and heart, they would flicker from screens worldwide. His name would spread with them. He was the one, the exclusive source.

Nola backed away, further into the woods.

The camera pursued her, wound up, triggered, hungry of lens, hungry for light, this small black box hunter of skin pictures with its robot dazzle eye.

Nola turned and ran into darkness, into rain droplet cascade. Branch tangle, mesh of crackle leaves. Hidden pathways, unknown routes.

Panic. Red haze in her sight.

Nola. Running, stumbling.

Peckman tracking her, camera at the ready,

Shooting.

Click whirrrrrr, click click whirrrrrr.

Closing on her.

Nola fell, hidden behind a tree trunk.

She could hear the camera moving through the trees, a shining creature of chrome and glass and shiny black plastic, approaching, seeking out, peering.

Crack of twigs, close-by

Uhhh...

Breath held.

Footsteps moving on, still searching.

Lens stutter.

Nola slipped off her clothing, revealing as much flesh as possible. She chose a different pathway, moving on step by step, slowly, quietly. Her body was searching the frequencies, calling down broadcasts of late summer foliage: falling petals, green leaves, russet shades, knotted branches, sticktangle of bird nests, black sudden blur and noise of wing beats, bird calls, play of shadows, raindrops, dappled light, insect noises, animal cries. With these effects she painted herself.

Camouflage Channel.

Tonight, live from the Forest of Dreams!

Naked flesh aglow with images.

Stay tuned for more after this!

Peckman waited, holding himself still.

The trees moved within trees, branches within branches, shivering, some kind of local disturbance.

Shimmer glade.

His eyes were dazzled, half-blinded by what he saw, and his camera clicked away madly, hardly knowing where to look. And all

the numbers inside the machine, all the little ones and zeroes, they burned themselves on nothingness,

on a brightdark shiver of branches
leaf upon leaf
as Nola's body melted away
into the forest,
becoming the forest.

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George wandered over to the company's mobile studio.

The producer was sitting on the step, drinking a beer. Her name was Cleo James. Just twenty-seven years old. A young woman with eyes already raw from lack of sleep.

George staggered into view, his clothes damp, hair matted, face red. He said:

'Do you know who I am?'

Cleo nodded. 'Of course.'

'I'm the father of Melissa. The father of...your victim.'

Cleo looked at him. 'We're doing all we can, Mr Gold. Really. I don't know what to say. No one can explain it. She's just...disappeared.'

'You want an exclusive?'

'An interview? Sure.'

'No interview. Just get a camera on me.'

'What?'

'Now.'

Cleo snapped her fingers and a technician came in sight, a sleek bodycam slung across his chest.

'Film this.' George's voice was harsh, without hope. 'I want it *live*, no edits.'

Click flood bloom of silver heat from a lighting unit, showing George's face in its lusty, dirt-smeared, blood-pink moment of driven need.

'Are you going to swear?'

George looked at the producer. 'What? Yes. Obscenities. Of course. Very, very probably.'

Cleo turned to the crew. 'Okay. I need a five-second delay, with autobleep.'

George stood at the centre of sudden activity.

'Okay. Mr Gold. We're rolling now.'

George nodded.

He got a countdown, fingers marking out the final three seconds.

Now live, exclusive, from the site of mystery.

George stared at the lens. He made an enemy of the lens, this thin round curve of glass, an apparatus that had made him his fortune, now he saw it as a parasite, a stealer of images.

He felt that his drunken heart was being sucked out.

'My name is George Gold,' he began. 'I have some claim to be the one true Saviour of this Nation's music.'

He laughed bitterly.

'I have eaten my own fingers to the bone. I have stolen my own money. I have sold my own soul to myself at a cut-down bargain-bucket price, and rendered it null and void, drained of value.'

His eyes lit up.

'George Gold! George fucking *bleep* Gold!'

His hands touched at his neck, the tender skin.

Shivers passed through him.

'A woman just tried to strangle me. A music star. My own creation. Check this: my own fucking *bleep* creation just tried to kill me. I can still feel her hands around my throat, and after everything I've given to her. But what does she know? Nola Blue? Nola fucking Blue! *bleep* Some crazy half-broken visionplex woman with her skin ablaze, showing me the world like she thinks I haven't seen it before.'

He twisted himself, tight bound.

Skin clenched. Teeth snarl.

'Listen to me. As a child and a young man I was beaten, made fun of, humiliated, bought and sold and bought again and raised up and laughed at and kicked halfway to death and back and pissed upon *bleep* and glorified as a two-bit god and a devil, and all of this on good old-fashioned television, in glorious hideous colour. Live in your homes!'

Now came a slow wave of warmth lit by moon and camera, his eyes alive at last, the old condition.

Memories of good and bad times. Escaping.

'I stole my first guitar, some cheapo number from Camden Market. I was what, 15, 16 years old? Just arrived in the capital, holes in my pockets, nothing else. This instrument was a truly horrible thing, a nasty, second-hand copy of a copy of a Fender Strat. Lousy sunburst finish paintjob, all peeling, all scratched. Dodgy pick-ups. I couldn't even get it in tune. Spent three weeks on it, polishing it up, strings breaking every other day, terrible crackles coming out of it, from a tinny box amplifier, bang, *rtzzzzzzzzzttttttt!* The noise it made. Shit. *bleep* Couldn't ask for worse and yet, here's the thing, people...I wrote 'Who Cares About Love?' on that same goddamn instrument. You see? Two years later, it was number one in half a dozen countries. You know that song. You've sung it. You've danced to it. Who the Fuck Cares About Love! *bleep* Number fucking one, worldwide. *bleep* First of many. Of course, I had to burn some people to get there. Whatever it takes, it takes. And more so.'

bleep *bleep* *bleep*

Now he breathed slow and easy and found his rhythm.

‘It doesn't matter. It does not matter, it does not matter one jot what you’re doing, it’s how you do it that counts. Just bring the good heavenly tunes to the people, the working people. They come home tired out from a hard day’s graft with hardly any money to show for it...listen now, let them put some music on. Make it easy for the everyday people to dream. That’s the one genuine point, the only goal. I keep saying this to the young ones coming up, all my sweet little creations. *Make it easy for the people to dream.* But they won't listen to me, they do not want to listen.’

Here he settled down, almost withdrawn.

‘The young won't listen.’

Quietly.

‘Ah no. They drift away. You hold them tight, far too tightly, and still they drift away.’

Slowing now.

‘Melissa. All lost.’

Now George’s eyes closed. His mouth moved alone.

Repeating. The one word.

Melissa...

Melissa, where are you!

Screaming.

MELISSA!!!

...

The camera loved him.

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Nola walked on through the woods.

I nearly killed him back there.

Jesus. My fingers, so close.

Nearly.

Nearly killed George.

What is happening to me?

Where can I go?

Flagging now, weakening. She looked down at her hands.

Fingers around the throat, squeezing...

Seeing the palms covered in blood.

...Oh God. Look at me. Weeping.

Weeping blood.

Not real blood; only the signal-cast image of blood seeping upwards from each palm.

The real and the unreal played in her mind, in her eyes and all along her body. She was lost in the moments of blackout and jump cut, in the gaps between signals. And all around her the trees glistened with recorded life, leaves flickering with code, with numbers, with artifice. Her body followed suit. This forest had been recorded once, filmed, years ago, and now she was appearing in the playback of that event. And the further she travelled, the more she believed. By walking on far enough perhaps she would come to the edge of the illusion, and thereby escape from it. Instead, the forest closed around her; dappleflecked, mysterious, labyrinthine, without map or memory, every tree and branch another part of the film of her life.

Time slowed.

The dark moved against her skin.

Keep going.

And then voices ahead, through the leaves.

Nola paused.

She was almost naked still, her outer clothing discarded during the chase. And yet she felt no cold, no shivering after-effects of running. Her body flowed hot with the pictures that covered her, that crept all over her, every last stretch of skin alive with stolen passion.

She crouched down and peeped out through the branches.

A travellers' camp had been set up within a bower, a roughly circular arrangement of patched tents and old rusty vans. It was close

to midnight, and yet the people were still awake, many of them sitting around a fire. A woman sang a ballad of lost desire. A tattered purple flag hung from a central mast, on the top of which a satellite dish slowly turned to gather messages from the sky. Close at hand, dogs followed trails of scent, seeking out this stranger. Herself.

Nola had no choice.

She dressed herself in images, in clothes stolen from fashion shows. An iridescent outfit in silvery blue and green and grey: trousers, blouse, jacket. Adorned like this, she stepped out from the trees.

A teenage girl noticed her first, and cried out in wonder.

Others turned to see, to gaze upon this sight, this woman of shimmer and gleam.

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Nola rested.

She slept fitfully for an hour or so, curled up in one of the tepees. Every so often, one or two of the camp's children would enter through the flap to stare at her, at the slow-moving pictures that shivered on her face even in sleep. They could only think that the woman's dreams had in some way oozed through her flesh, rising to the surface. And how wonderful it was, to see that her dreams were their own dreams, culled from the vision screen.

This was, they decided, even better than the Dome.

This was *live*. From the source.

Truly alive.

The children watched in silence, until called to task by their parents. There was work to be done, in readiness for the night's events. This special night...

The camp was known as Tangent Five.

The residents were long-term fans of the Pleasure Dome, outcasts and wanderers from many different parts of the globe. Over the years, they had each of them drifted towards the location of their primal desire. One lonely day or night they had wandered there along the new pilgrim trail, set down their weary packs and decided to stay for a few hours. Hours had turned into days, into whatever time they could grab from their other lives, their so-called 'real' lives. And so one week had turned into two, into a month, into a year or more, and the initial reasons for being there had become a fanciful tale told around the fire, as nocturnal broadcasts triggered the stars. These outposts were semi-legal zones; the Dome company tended to let the intruders be, allowing them to become part of the overarching myth of the programme. Some of the older folk were veterans of the very first
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camp set up in series two of the programme.

Projection alone was not enough for them; they needed to feel the image and the reality conjoined. Subsequently, they had folded themselves into the porous regions that grow around sites of extreme media activity, and found themselves willingly lost on the maps. And now the they mourned the slow passing of the Dome in all-night vigils of flame and shadow. For rumours on the vine and ether had foretold that this was to be the final night of broadcast, perhaps for all time. The Dome was closing down its circuits.

Nola woke to the sound of music.

It was still dark outside. She came out of the tepee to see that all the residents of Tangent Five were gathered together, children and all. Their focus was a large white bed-sheet stretched between a van and a tree trunk. Live-feed images of the silent empty darkened form of the Pleasure Dome flickered on the surface of the sheet, projected from a homemade device. Sparks from the camp fire flitted across the screen and around people's faces, adding to the atmosphere of a pagan ritual. A portable generator squatted nearby like a humming beast. The camp's satellite dish had been decorated especially for this final ceremony, with long strips of glittering silver foil hanging down from the bowl.

Nola looked around.

It was three in the morning and the air had turned cold. People were dressed in overcoats and scarves. Nola herself wore a similar outfit, given to her by one of the women who had taken her in, Bethany. A woollen hat pulled low down over Nola's face meant that only her eyes could be discerned, and yet the campers glanced at her, nervously. She was a mystical being to them, a species made of electric glow, signal and tissue, one of the fabled illuminated wanderers as depicted in the old creation stories of the Cathode Ray Transmission and the Vacuum Tube.

Nola took her place in the audience.

The sound system crackled and the screen buzzed and shivered with static. Now the Dome's image vanished as a pirate channel cut through the signal. The figure of Misty Parker appeared. Misty: celebrity gossiper, creeper of the all-night grapevine. Her gothic hair dyed aflame and her face like a butterfly stretched and pinned for permanent display, white of skin with painted patterns on her cheeks and brow. Her violet-tinged lips made grinning movements as her show's theme tune played to an end.

Misty's words poured forth.

'Dome watchers everywhere, I bring you the mystery of Now! I mean this minute, this very second. There is no other story worthy of our time. Namely: Just where has the lovely, desperate, beautiful,

humble, fiery, shy and dancing Melissa Gold gone?'

The crowd around the rough-made screen watched in silence, some of them nodding their heads, others closing their eyes in meditation.

Misty's grin lengthened. 'The producers will not tell us. They keep their little secrets. Oh but we shall know the truth, for we are the people, the true-hearted and only open-eyed viewers of this outcast land.'

Misty gleamed. Her voice took on a deeper hue.

'I speak now of the pains and the pleasures of life in the Dome. I whisper of words half-said, of rumours in the night caught on webs of air and numbers.'

Now the screen showed the live audience gathered at the ring-fence. They too stood at rest, in quiet, in flickers of light, in reverence, heads bowed, hands intertwined with their nearest colleague - strangers, friends, families, fellow viewers - all held together in these moments of shared doubt and loss.

Misty spoke over the scene.

'It is said that Melissa has left behind the petty bondage of flesh and entered another, better realm, one made of light and shade, of flicker and film. She has become lost in the cameras, sacrificed to light and vision.'

The people around the camp murmured in kind:

...lost...lost in the cameras...lost...

The screen faded to nightblack. Misty's voice continued over this blank setting.

'Melissa? If you are out there, if you can speak to us, communicate with us in any way or form, please do so now.'

Nola shifted in her seat.

Misty's words sounded like incense, the incantations of a priestess.

'Please, Melissa, we have darkened our screens for you, especially. Reveal yourself to us, speak to us. Show yourself.'

The screen trembled.

Trembled in moonlight.

And all gazed spellbound.

Nola imagined them. All those at the studio site, silent. All those at the fence, in the various long-stay camps, all those in their living rooms staying up late to see this, to be witness. All silent. Nightworkers and nocturnals in hospital wards, factories, offices, in cafes and bars. Silent. The nation as a whole, silent. Millions of viewers around the world. Silent. The technicians and the executives at the London headquarters of Pleasure Dome Enterprises. Silent. Misty Parker herself. Silent, waiting. All people everywhere looking at

their chosen screens, spellbound: on visionplex, boxcomps, portapops, telebugs, somapods, hexplayers, antique television sets dragged from storage for this ceremony. A piece of cloth stretched between trees. All staring at darkness and waiting for an answer, a view of Melissa in her new guise, whatever it might be, her new location, wherever she dwelled. Surely, surely technology will give us this glimpse, this viewing? Surely.

Waiting.

Still waiting.

The stretched white sheet quivered in the nightwind, black, empty of life, of sound or vision.

The screen gave nothing back, offered no opening.

Nola held onto the seat-edge, fingers tightening. She could hear voices in her head, a pressure building. Her body itched and burned all over, every inch.

The viewers sighed.

Lost...still lost...

Live footage of the Dome returned to the cloth screen, as the pirate signal died, and the official programme regained control of the airwaves.

Nobody spoke for a moment or two.

A young man stepped forward, stripped to the waist. He started to dance in a precise low-stepping choreography, energy barely contained. The fire bristled. People began to chant, quietly at first, then building. A woman was playing electric guitar, generating minor key variations on the Dome's theme tune, conjured from feedback. The music turned darker, more ragged, louder, atonal, as the tribe's Shaman rose to his feet, a torch of naked flames held in his hand. The shadows danced with him, like the black spirits of wild animals tethered only by fragile spells. Nola shuddered, her own skin crawling with projected fur and claws under her coat. At the climax of the dance the Shaman set fire to the white sheet and a gasp ran through the watchers as the televised image of the Pleasure Dome burned away. People cried out in pain and release. The music burst into noise, alive with bloodnotes and bonesparkle. Prayers were intoned, the words borrowed from archaic television dialogues and catchphrases, all twisted, made abstract. And then silence as the ritual died with its god.

Fire crackle.

Night forest sounds.

Ashes from the cloth blowing away.

Now all eyes turned to Nola.

She stood up hesitantly and moved to the front of the crowd. What she had to do came to her from her skin, from the voice of flesh,

from the image demon. From herself. She slipped off her outer clothing and felt no shame. The show began. It was a broadcast never before seen, created by Nola jamming together signals, producing her own programmes. Tonight on Skinvision we bring you delights: *Highway Zoo Racers*, *Death Cosmetics*, *Animals on Drugs*, and *Dirty Rock and Roll Decorators*. Nola stirred the pictures, making hybrids: *Bride of Cars*, *The Human Fish Talk Show*, *Naked Days of Flame and Wonder*, *Life and Death of the Corporate Misfit, Broken-Winged Pegasus*. She cracked sounds and voices into pieces, bringing them together in new combinations: *Blood on the Biscuits*, *Monkeys Making Money*, *Mister Kiss Kiss is Singing*, *Blue Electrocuted Poems of Football*, *Dream Midnight Goodbye*, *Zingo Lingo Bingo!!!* Nola made her own programmes and the audience watched, all wide in their eyes. The people laughed and cheered and oohed and ahhed. They salivated. They whispered. They wanted more.

Handheld cameras gazed upon her, lenses enraptured.

Nola slowed the vision down, catching the mood. Her skin glowed with bioluminescence as the images materialised:

Stolen glances of love,
gaslight gently radiating on a woman's face,
a man's arms, enclosing,
a couple standing dark against sunset,
waves touching at sand on some faraway beach,
a kiss so tender, so magnified on flesh that the lips burned with stars and sunfever.

Pictures. Soap-style clichés, exaggerations, the standard stock footage of love.

No matter: they were born of desire.

And a teenage girl was sitting close, a kid who gazed upon the flickering imagery with such need that Nola saw her own reflection in the girl's face, Nola young and still believing, Nola singing for her own pleasure, making up tunes, words, testing out feelings in the wild flung-out starry-eyed sulphurmoon magic-spell ballet of music, playing live to her image in the wardrobe mirror, posing, dancing her own steps, her own beat.

And the young girl gave all this back to Nola
with hooded eyes,
a veiled smile,
a slight movement of the body in response
coded gestures:
a nod of the head, gentle hand claps.
The way it goes...

Here, now, amid tangled branches, under the cold morning stars, around a fire built in a hidden bower, life was being lived.

During the presentation Nola felt her body change. She was being taken over entirely by the signal; no longer human, but a strange beguiling amalgam. A soft machine for the eyes. She could feel the image of Melissa alive in her, rising up her spine. The signal spoke; not in words to begin with, not even in pictures, but in pure random pulses of energy. Until Nola felt her skull possessed, her face taken over, masked. Sparks travelled the curves of her skin.

Melissa's face on Nola's face.

Pure this time, more at peace. Settled in flesh and light, held tender.

Begin now...begin...

Melissa's eyes opened.

They were black; jet sky midnight black.

No whites.

People gasped. Cries were heard, of surprise, of shock. A child started to bawl.

Now the eyes of Melissa in close-up, filling Nola's face entirely. The whites appeared, fading into view. Now the eyeballs, a startling brown. Now the pupils, dilated, taking in light, giving light. All the passions they held, these orbs. Memories, stories, rage and love. All seemed to be on view, here to be taken in pleasure.

The eyes stared ahead.

Now the mouth appeared. Nola's mouth overlaid with Melissa's.

The lips moved.

Melissa Gold spoke, the voice murmuring up from silence into words, soft babble, chaos flow:

...alive in dust and pixels flowing from hair and tongue, adrift in films of the lost, those who are never watched, looked over, closed in black mirrors and a stitched mouth, now cracked open and spitting diamonds on the blade that slices darkness, gathering pictures and noise, alive, to sing of the city of moon and demons where the famous ones live when their fame no longer sustains them, their fake golden wings tattered and folded, alive, adrift, singing of the hidden doorway, the portal of the eye, gardens of silence and shadows, their voices tangled in moth-flutter, whispers, messages in pollen maps, signalflow, moonglow on skin, singing...

The voice drifted back into silence, distance. Strands of black hair fell across her face. And the eyes closed as the face of Melissa merged back into flesh.

Nola was seen once more.

The audience waited in silence, held by what they had seen and heard. Until, hand upon hand they started to applaud. And Nola knew then what she had to do, how this journey would be played out. She had given the people mirror-dreams, and they offered in turn that she stay with them awhile, for another day or two at least, but Nola

thanked them and said no, that she had things to do yet, one more place to find.

She gathered her few belongings together and asked for directions that would lead her away from the Dome, deeper into the woods. These were given and Nola set off, leaving the people of Tangent Five to their memories of the Magic Glowing Woman, her colours and images still gleaming in the afterburn of their eyes.

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A pathway led through the trees.

Nola's body lit the way, her skin shining with a soft glow fashioned from the gas lamp flicker of period-costume dramas, and the curve and dip of cop-show flashlights. She walked on alone, and then not so alone as a dark shape moved along beside her, gentle of step.

No twigs were cracked,

no leaves disturbed;

the figure drifted in mirror motion.

Nola stopped.

The figure stopped also.

'Who's there?'

There was no answer. Nola could only think it was the photographer, coming back for more images.

'I'm warning you. Stay away from me.'

Again, silence. And yet a person could be seen standing amongst the branches.

Nola parted the leaves and peered through the gap.

A young girl was looking back at her.

'Who are you?'

The girl remained silent. Her eyes were red-lined; she may have been recently crying.

'Let me see you,' Nola said.

No movement.

Nola pushed through the trees to reach the girl.

She was perhaps six or seven, with translucent and pale skin, and straight-combed blonde hair.

A living room flickered around the girl, suspended like a painted mist between the trees, webbed from branches.

Nola recognised the room, the girl.

It was her seventh birthday party.

Her mother and father were moving round about, along with some other relatives and a few children her own age. Amongst them, herself, this little girl whose body and face shimmered with barely present life, a ghost caught on video, years ago, years, the image degraded and fuzzy, conjured into being by Nola, peeled from her skin, given life, tremulous life.

The girl spoke in a voice so quiet and crackly, recorded on tape:

‘I can’t do it alone. You know I can’t.’

Without movement, in silence, fearful of disturbing the picture, Nola watched the scene unfold.

‘I have to sing along.’

The mother’s voice then, unheard, but Nola knew every word. *Jerry, get the CD player working.*

My first ever music centre player, Nola realised, seeing the cheap black plastic machine on the shelf, hearing the song unfold from tinny speakers, her favourite tune from childhood: ‘Tomorrow Came a Day Too Late’ by Sumi James. Not the main tune, but one of the remixes. Yes, now she remembered.

Her party trick.

Papa spinning the tune, instrumental dub, herself singing along to the wordless music. Words of her own devising.

Nola as she was, stepping forward into the centre of the room, all eyes upon her, how she loved that.

And then she recalled her real name, her given name.

Diana.

The young girl standing there in repose, calming herself, waiting for the music to reach its perfect moment. And then beginning...

Sally falls,
The moon catches her.
Susie loses her cat,
The sun he finds the cat
For Susie.

Nola found herself singing along quietly, murmured under breath, but each word in perfect accord.

Ginny takes the wrong path
Clouds bring her home...

The song continued to its end, before the living room and the family faded from view, returning to air and wave and pixels. Leaving only the girl, who turned now and seemed to look directly at Nola across the years. She contemplated this grown woman before her, noting the marks on the face and brow where twigs had scratched. Hair awry and stuck with leaves. Nola could not tell if the girl was really looking at her, it hardly seemed possible, but nevertheless she set her skin alive with dancing images, with colours and sounds drawn from family film, uploaded memories, photos and vidiflex.

Cartoon cats chasing each other.

Birds fluttering above telegraph wires.

A street. Grey, urban, littered. A dog nosing along the gutter.

A house. Despite everything, a family home.

Tinkle of a bell hanging from a car’s rear-view mirror. Laughter.

A child alone in a forest.

Nola blinked.

The young girl reached out with her hand, towards Nola's face. Her fingers were coloured by the images as they flickered and died, as new ones came into view. And yet the girl, Diana, she could not touch the skin itself; her hand blurred into dust and vapour. 'It's beautiful,' she murmured, or seemed to murmur. 'Very beautiful.'

Nola smiled.

Eyes linked in that moment.

And the two walked past each other, woman and girl, real and projection, each along the same pathway, one to the North, one South.

Nola glanced back and saw the girl for a final time as she vanished, flickered away into air.

Afterglow. Sizzle of image fade.

A memory in dim light,

taken by darkness.

Nola carried on for a couple of miles more until the forest petered out. She hit a train track and continued along it, taking on instinct a left-handed route. Each footstep created its own small glowcircle to move within. Her body had settled down, images moving across her skin in slow random patterns, splashes of blue and gold and scarlet, drifts of black and white, abstract shapes.

There were lights ahead.

Nola left the track, taking a narrow country lane. The first few houses of a small village appeared, most in darkness, one of two with lighted windows. More buildings melted into view, lit by streetlamps. The place, seen through Nola's eyes, took on a strange, dreamlike quality.

The air shimmered.

She moved onto a patch of open land and kept on walking until the houses were out of sight.

A patch of waste ground.

Litter. Discarded household goods, shopping trolleys, tattered plastic sheeting. The railway line could be seen on the other side of the disused field, travelling onwards. Droplets of rain still glimmered on the telephone lines, where the bleached-out moon was caught, low in the sky.

This would do. Here.

Here where human voices travelled along the wires, asking questions, demanding answers, sharing secrets. Nola could hear them on her skin, all these voices calling to each other along the networks. The vision of a vast land of dreams came to her, a Ghost England that stretched from the Pleasure Dome outwards, never-ending, but corresponding in some subtle, magical way to the real country.

Figures moved in mist, made of vapour themselves and barely

seen. Echoes. Images broadcast and multiplied, drifting free, conjured from traces.

Parasite signals.

And so it was that on this patch of dirty ground beside a rusting railway line Nola Blue, former music star, stripped off her clothing. She stood naked. There was no one to see her, no one to disturb this moment, this feeling of heat, this pure uncomplicated love that moved through her.

The airwaves touched her body.

Tang of metal on the tongue

blue smoke

skullshiver.

Now...

Nola reached out for every last broadcast she could taste, smell and touch. From airwaves, from cable and wireless. Pictures swirled on her skin, caught aflame in their own psychedelic floodburn.

Crsizk, craxkl, flkkx, xstkksssssstt

Sparks haloed her.

Time to go out LIVE.

Countdown:

5...4...3...2...1

Rolling...

NOLA was a split-screen maniac, flowing down the skin of herself in the darklight;

She was a feeding body of image desire;

She was desire itself, imagining itself, spewing the hot blood images of itself to the world;

She was the symbiomorphic skin-demon of the new media plague, the viral code awash with sweat and voices and liquid colours, flesh set to flicker, fleeting,

without roots

without conclusions

without targets;

She was every newscaster currently on air, worldwide;

She was every rent-a-brain pundit, every footballer, every do-it-yourself businessman, every vapid personality;

She was all the game-show hosts combined, ripped apart, jumbled back together again;

All the couch-bound commentators, home-video terrorists, moonlagged astronauts, cowboy builders, soapstar cocaine sniffers, flagging actors, high-flying superheroes, all the back-pedalling politicians and the femme fatales, every last amateur chef, make-over expert, petrolhead, cultural reviewer, shock-tactic micro-entity, every trailer-trash confessor of barely comprehended perversions, all the

pretend-at-life kings and queens of daytime dreams; Nola was all of them brought together, in pieces, in motion,

in dreams.

She was the Glamour,

no longer the victim of a spell,

but the spell itself, as it cast its scattered charms upon the airwaves like the dust of stars.

Nola Blue, hungry for content.

She was the collector of spirits, the ghost messages from afar. Windows and subscreens opened and closed on her body as the signals came flooding in from all the Channel SK1N fans out there, all the buttonclickers with their homemade kits of self expression and self broadcast: telebug messages, portapop vids of cats playing pianos, flamespikes, flexitexts and mailblasts, thousands of glamacam downloads, facepics, vinepages, countless shimmers from Shimmertown, hexaplays, somablips, vibeflaunts, meShows, parapips, iJingles, all the whirl and whirr and cascade of noise, the people aglow with themselves, with life, with need, small-time junkie alchemists one and all, big on life, sending Nola their messages from the ether, the vapourplay of sparks from the wondermind.

Nola gathered and glimmered with them all.

She was the rigorous old-school back-and-forth motion grid-work of the cathode ray tube, the 01001110101011 of binary expression, the surge of electrons, the spark at the end of the night, the face reflected in the black-sky monitor screen when the power is shut down;

Nola was the interface, the borderline inside, lost in the colours, blurred by sonic brightness, a spray of pixels escaping her edges, fractal style;

She was the slow walker on the melting glass face of the visionplex machine, emerging from the mist of replication like a mirror phantom;

She was the hot-zone ranger, edge floater, a woman moving tangential to the nightmare, cast adrift on the cusp of transmission;

She was the spindle-legged dancer caught on the wire tangle of aerials, and yet free, set free at last to sing the clouds alive with pictures, to caress the datastream as it shrouded the earth in knowledge, in rapid-fire desires;

She was the body exploded in full view, the pornographic moment expanded, radiant, with her flesh of phosphorus glowing where electrons struck and dissolved into metaphors.

Nola was blood-host to paradise.

One of the new telemorphic dreamers,

afloat in the Abstract-Futurist expression of lust and love,

inventing techniques on the fly as she plucked and sampled from all that surrounded her, carried by the wind;

Analogue Goddess of the Daily Ephemerama, conjured into being from the secret heart of

TELEVISION!

Nola was the avatar, the vision fix, a poem herself, electric verb,

plugged direct to the wetware terminal

clothed in static,

the fragile exterminating moongolden electrostatic angel of the chaos transmission,

working the Fever Skindub Special:

mismatches, jump-cuts, montage episodes,

slow fades, fast edits,

dissolves,

speaking from chatrooms, feedback,

and microphone bleed.

Her body whispered all the various iterations of doubt and love: on demand, interactive, the signal encrypted at the skin source, decoded on contact with air.

She was made from soundtracks

from interference

from songs of flesh and wire:

I was asleep but my skin came alive.

For my head is filled with dreams, and my hair with the rain of the night,

And my hands they drip with pictures, and my flesh sings with dreams and memories

That drift upon me like a mist of jewels.

Nola made herself a body of light from all that she found, constructing herself every second, destroying herself every second, coming alive in the moment,

this moment

now

again

once more

breathing

burning

flickering,

incandescent.

Here was the city of lost images speaking in tongues, gathered together on a woman's skin.

And whatever people around the world were watching at that time, on their living-room screens, in their bedrooms, on their portapops and telebugs and hexplayers, Nola was there as well,

dragging broadcasts down from satellites, jamming messages, decrypting diamond dust sonic bloom music, gathering and urging the images and sounds onwards, multiplying them, arousing them. Faces appeared briefly on her flesh, superimposed, all the lost and the dead and the semi-forgotten and the broken-hearted, all that she carried one by one by one, this colony of spectres, precious cargo, until Melissa herself appeared, Melissa Gold, she of the torn stomach and the sliced arms and the letters on the skin, the knife digging in; she of the blood flow, the word body, the national dreamer, held here briefly, carried here, that face taking over from Nola's own once more, one last time.

Possessed, possessing.

And then gone. The image of the woman folded back. And Nola realised then: these messages will never truly die, they only drift along, alone, waiting for a suitable decoding engine. And this is what she was born to be, and what she might yet become. Not of the flesh, but of the spirit of the media itself.

Pure image. Pure.

She was seen at that moment on every visionplex screen across the land, on every device currently activated. Not as a body, not in form a woman or even a person, not human, but a onetime blast, a full-frequency bodysonic explosion of colours and sounds filling the image space, dazzling the eye with sunpowder transfiguration. Here was Nola, touching tongues and eyes with strangers in the sparklenet,

briefly seen, briefly
a single flashflicker of shape and noise
fading down to zero
blackout...

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Alone now, her final broadcast over, she felt herself slowing. Feelings shivered her.

Stray pictures fluttered,
unfurling across her body's curved expanses,
ether voices trembled.

Nola traced further along the wave spectrum, searching for a portal, a plug-in, for the hidden or coded information sent there just for her; the way home, a way to activate the higher channels, those beyond the normal range, the secret pathways.

For now her body was failing her, bringing pain.

No blues like the gemstone blues, shining...

Cut. Skin fever.

Night sparkles...
~~~

Shriek of flesh. Keep going. Sing!
No blues like a white moon shining
Dreams unfolding.
Body's raw edges on fire. Just keep singing.
Down the sky of burnt-out stars...
And something inside, within the flesh itself, turning, changing.
Where the night sparkles
glimmer
flicker
flare
burn...
.,/.=//.>
Pain
Cut
Shriek
Rawness
/,/..,+/>*/>>
Blood...
Blood pouring from her stomach.
Real.
Her fingers wet.
It was time.
Final barely heard phrip and fizz
of static from the skin
ppfzzzzz
And she fell to her knees on the damp ground as the image of a bird came alive in her stomach,
where it tried out its frozen wings,
forcing them to crack open, to move again,
to be alive again,
allowing the bird to fly upwards
from Nola's belly,
across her breasts,
to her long neck
and then to her face.
There now...
There!
A bird painted not with beauty but with all the dirt and wounds collected in a long hard life, in battle, in love, with torn feathers and a busted leg and a chipped beak and one of its eyes half closed; and yet a bird of deeper loveliness for all of that.
It rose up the channels of flesh
along the skindreams of the woman
slowly flapping dusty wings inside her head,

stronger now
finally
taking off for the silvery black
moonblur sky above.

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The team moved towards the structure, walking slowly, with purpose. They carried with them all the instruments and tools they would need for the task ahead. There were four operatives altogether.

They started work on the skin of the Dome, examining every inch for traces of a dream, for clues to a lost psyche.

They noted the slitwound where Melissa had used her improvised blade. The team's repair had ruptured, allowing a small amount of biotech fluid to seep out.

Apart from this, nothing untoward was found.

All the dreams and nightmares had drained away from between the layers, leaving only this fragile covering, stretched thin and clear.

And so they tore down the Pleasure Dome.

They removed each segment of polyhobarium, working with saw and hammer, with pliers and cutters. The space within was revealed, fully exposed to the open air for the first time in over a decade.

They looked through the few items Melissa had left behind: her bedroll, half-empty trays of food, a couple of books, odds and ends, clothing, a wash kit. The crude handmade knife. A small ragdoll. Nothing unusual was discovered. Only these few traces of a life once lived in public view, now fallen to darkness.

All of the personal items were removed for further study.

Now the ground was laid bare.

The team searched the area the Dome had once covered. A compact device was set down at the centre of the marked-out space. One of the operatives activated this, moving a detector wand slowly in sixty degree arcs, back and forth, back and forth.

Beep...Beep...

They were looking for hidden objects. Some item. A body, a means of escape.

Anything at all. Some kind of hope, belief.

Beep...Beep...Beep...

Their findings remained secret, for the time being.

*C*ameras watched nervously from the surrounding field, ravenous electronic eyes standing witness over a strange ritual. The viewers at the ring fence stood in silence. Others, further back, gazed at the giant screens. Faithful viewers, one and all; they would stay for the duration, however long it took. Everybody was waiting for a moment

of revelation.

A small forensic cleaner glided across the soil. They found skin cells, strands of human hair, faeces, fingernail clippings, bits of rotten food, seeds, worms, silver and black speckled feathers, wing cases, tiny coloured beads.

The team started to dig. They worked with trowel and brush, with comb and tray. They removed the soil in layers, carefully sifting through each level. They laboured quietly, methodically, speaking only a few words to each other now and again. Occasional curses. A cough. They worked through the night, illumined by spotlight and torch. The trees of the surrounding forest bent forward under a low wind, the branches scratching together. Shadows danced. It was easy to imagine ghosts at play.

They found an object in the soil, just below the surface.

It was a page torn from a notebook.

The image wavered across screens around the world.

Depicted on the yellowed paper was a drawing, lines and words scrawled in dark pencil. It might be a plan for a strange mechanism, or else a map of an unknown land. A news channel psychologist thought it a self portrait of the victim's subconscious mind, that realm beyond the Dome's reach.

Yes, some people were calling Melissa a victim.

From the comfort of the studio, various experts discussed the mystery of her disappearance. Commentators talked of the spiritual aspects of the Dome, of the possible mental problems it might bring to the user. Flowcharts and diagrams revealed the technical aspects of the building's structure. Avid fans of the programme fired off shimmertexts:

>Hw dare thy do ths to the Dome! It is sacrilge.

>I am cryng. I can't stop crying.

>Dumb arse, shd no tears. It's all a publicity stunt. The company is laughing. It's all about making money!

>Where is Melissa? Why are thy not tellng us anythng?

>She is dead.

>Don't say that! I will not believe it.

>There are strnge forces at play. Things we know nothing about.

>Exactly. Beware of Media Voodoo. You have been warned.

Dawn was approaching, touching the sky above the rim of the enclosing hills.

>They are MURDERING the Pleasure Dome! They are KILLERS!

Viewing figures reached an all-time high for this or any other season.

>I am saddened beyond measure.

>I feel lke my heart has been cut out and thrwn to the wolfs.

Previous occupants of the Dome were brought forward to talk of their own experiences. They spoke of boredom, exhilaration, embarrassment and despair. Pushed further, they mentioned echoes, vapours, unknown feelings, glimpses of the face of God, the darkness of the soul. All bore the same expression, the same wistful look in their eyes, the downturn of the lips. Their brows were furrowed. One religious commentator called them, 'The beautiful children of the dusk'. He talked of the giving up of flesh, of sacrifice.

Meanwhile, the special investigation team continued their work excavating the Dome. Soil fell from spade, crumbled to dust in their hands, trickled between fingers. And then, at a depth of almost one and a half feet, a patch of skin was seen.

Carefully, the area was cleared.

The skin was soft, pale, moon coloured.

The operatives sat back and discussed this, made plans, and then set to, scraping more soil away from the exposed flesh, revealing more and more of the body that lay there buried, hidden away, now slowly revealed in its entirety.

Here was the subject of this year's experiment.

Melissa Gold.

The last of the sacred dreamers.

Her body was examined by a doctor and pronounced dead. The image of her corpse was carried around the globe, across the screens of towns and cities, through living rooms and kitchens and bedrooms, around the fence at the site. The crowd watched as Melissa, *their* Melissa, was lifted free from the Dome site and carried to a waiting ambulance, her face covered by a white sheet.

The people stood in silence.

Only the sound of cameras could be heard. Buttons clicked, lenses zoomed and whirred at her passing.

George Gold was seen entering the vehicle alongside his daughter's body.

The crowd watched the ambulance depart. And then in groups, in couples, or one by one, the people walked away from the fence until only a bare handful remained. These last few hung their heads and they wept. They had no desire to return to any other kind of life, none at all.

The guards packed up their belongings, the production team followed.

The skeletal remains of the Dome looked desolate and bleak in the darkness.

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The days fell away.

Nights grew colder, the moon waned

and grew again.

Melissa's body was examined, probed, the skin peeled open. All things were normal: her heart seemed to have slowed of its own accord, fading in gentle rhythms to a stop. A few days later she was buried with as much dignity as could be managed, whilst hundreds of reporters and photographers and well-wishers and Pleasure Dome fanatics crowded the streets around the cemetery.

George stood at the graveside, Christina beside him.

Their hands were linked together.

Two weeks went by.

The production team had long since left the site to its own devices. The area seemed smaller now, hardly capable of containing human dreams. Now and again a few curious people turned up, to walk slowly around the circle of miscoloured earth where the Dome had once stood. Some of them combed the ground with gardening forks, metal detectors and divining rods, uncovering a number of items: a lock of bright pink hair, a gin bottle, a playing card, a blue button, coins, ticket stubs and the like, but nothing of any real worth. Nothing connected to either the Dome or its final occupant.

Programmed nature took over, covering the ground with autumn weeds and dead leaves.

Three weeks.

George Gold sat quietly in his shuttered rooms. No matter where they rested in the house, all of his many visionplex screens were draped with black cloth, unwatched and unloved. George supped his whiskey and stared at his collection of vinyl records, occasionally playing one of them. But his missing daughter seemed to hover in the tunes, the lyrics, in the space between the notes, in the grooves even. It was too much to take, and so he silenced the turntable and sat alone, drinking, tapping his fingers on the armrest of his favourite chair.

Christina waited at the door, hoping for a sign.

Four weeks passed.

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The first sighting was made.

It took place during the recording of the Deedee Baxter Chat Show. One of the guests had made an outrageous comment about the behaviour of the new wave of immigrants, and a member of the audience had shouted out in angry response. The camera panned across the rows of seated spectators to reach the heckler. A couple of
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days later, when the programme was aired, a strange discovery was made. As the camera moved along the row, the figure of Melissa was briefly seen in passing.

Row J, seat 12.

She was sitting perfectly still, relaxed, smiling to herself. Melissa Gold. Once believed lost, passed away and buried, now found. Or else a woman who looked very like her. But there was no evidence of this person having actually arrived at the studio, and none of her leaving. She was missing from all the security footage. When questioned, the audience members in the seats on either side could remember nothing at all about their neighbour. In fact, no ticket had been issued for that particular seat.

The visitor was a mystery.

When the tapes of the show were closely examined there appeared to be some kind of fault in the recording. Melissa's outline was a little fuzzy, her face had a blurred quality to it. She could neither be placed, nor calculated. Her features could not be enhanced, nor brought to book, nor tendered. She could not be focussed upon, not fully.

A recording was delivered to George Gold. In his private rooms he uncovered one of his screens. Here he dared to watch the incident. Over and over and over. His hand reached out to caress the glass where his daughter's beautiful and hazy face appeared. He could not believe that he had made this young woman, this being, from his own flesh.

He whispered to her, he pleaded with her.

He drank and cursed.

Fingers hitting the remote buttons:

Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Melissa's image jumping in time and space.

He cried out at her:

Come back to me.

Melissa. Come back.

George sat there alone. He waited.

Once a day Christina arrived to administer a kind of rejuvenation rite: cleaning his face, applying moisturiser, spooning food to the pulpy mouth, moving his hand to sign documents and memos. Paperwork, fleshwork. She took pride in this, a cruel but tender-hearted pride. Here was her new charge. The man himself, the once upon a time King of the People's Music, now sitting still and quiet whilst a wet sponge was wiped across his brow and cheeks, and his lips were dabbed with balm.

Two days later Melissa appeared again.

Once more on the screen, this time sitting in the crowd at a live

sporting event. More and more appearances were noted: the young woman's image wandering across the rear office space during a news broadcast, or else standing amongst the crowd at a fashion show. Once she was spotted in an old film, a desert war drama first made in 1952, where she stood out against a shimmering backdrop of sky. Nobody could predict when or where this apparition would next appear. A few times she was seen in police documentaries, an indistinct figure at the edge of motorway accidents and murder scenes. Her eyes were unfocused, half hooded; she barely glanced at the aftermath of violence.

Other programmes, other times.

Her face clad in shadow, or bleached white by the wash of studio lighting.

Melissa was reaching out. George knew this. He could feel her, he could sense her desperation, her need. Hour by hour he stared at the screen. He fell asleep in the armchair, with the set still playing. He took his meals with the glow of the screen upon him, the few morsels he could manage.

Waiting. Only waiting. Come to me...

The appearances increased in number and measure. Melissa's image moved from set to set, stage to stage, programme to programme. Visionplex fanatics claimed that Nola Blue was obviously involved in this haunting of the screen, that she was the carrier signal. Countering this, social media experts claimed the manifestations were nothing more than wishful thinking, a woman somehow conjured into being by the audience's intense desire for reflection and completion. Indeed, the spectral figure seemed to take on more life each time she appeared, as though feeding on the camera's gaze, on the ravenous eyes of the spectators. Her face was by now highly detailed, her eyes bright and fierce.

It was her, there was no doubting that.

Sometimes she laughed, other times she cried, depending on the particular show's content.

But who was watching whom?

She was a spirit of the airwaves and cable, a voodoo image.

Zombie Glitch. Interference smear.

Ghost.

She was given many names, her body surrounded by theories and explanations.

Only transmission felt her truly.

Now the figure appeared fully formed in a costume drama, dressed in regal attire, a gown of scarlet cloth dotted with fake pearls. This was a character that had never been scripted, never acted out, never filmed. And yet here she walked through a realm of mist and

noise, a battlefield. Moving silently, slowly, unarmed as the guns fired around her and the earth burst open black and fiery.

Sancta Maria...Mater Dei...

George Gold awoke suddenly. Something had pulled him from sleep, something in a dream.

A spoken word.

Now...

His eyes blurred, trying to open.

The screen buzzed with colour, with dots of light.

George leaned forward in his chair.

A face filled the screen.

He stared at this.

It was her.

My child...

Melissa's face.

Her body.

Her hand, reaching out.

There...

George could hardly move. He dared not move, for fear of disturbing her, of curtailing the moment.

Then he touched the screen. He could not resist. His palm on her palm.

Warm...warm flesh...

This was her final appearance.

So warm.

Other realms awaited her. The figure was merely something that stirred in the wires, a presence that drifted across the circuits for a while. A digital shadow set to tremble

and activate itself at a bare touch,

a murmur of instruction:

Click. Click, click.

Click, click.

Click.

The screen murmured.

The ghost spoke in code, in whispers, in a voice made of numbers, of darkness,

of fading colours,

electrons, motion itself,

fading

memories,

traces...

.....>*.....
.....contact?\.....,*(...?\.....
.....tv/waiting>\.....
...../0>1(*)*eyes*>.....
.....(my skin is/my...\.....\.....
.....Skin isdrift.\...ing;.....
.....By which roads..\.....\.....\.....
..... should I.....\\.\.....
.....travel?>...\.\.....
.....tick/.....
...../////tock>clock>/10110.....^.1.....
...../"!//^MERGE programmes.....1....0.....
.....>100((,>//<my skin is>+=.....
...../////<%*drifting*>broken^>,\.....
>.heat.....too late now. too early\\£.....
...blur.....It's so cold:*(@'out here>.....
...../.so cold>//the moon is falling.....
.....^/SIGNALS broken:/,my name is.....
.....,.my name is...broken/011011/n/o^>?(la/\\>.....
.....In Spirit Flicker city.....10/,</110?+.....
...../////I lay down and wept...../011.....
.....for thee, TeleviZION:/\\1.....#/^011<...
.....(Waiting now///&^C%?/\>\0.....
..... soft black *eyes*.....
.....watching me>///.....
...../*~parasight//too far, too.....
.....close <broken>///&8*/< /\\"?.....
...../< who is that? voices>\\".....,.>\....
...../////no. nobody//10/@~#.....
.....memories//ether *mist*^.....
.....traces 011101>no//>la^^>?.....\\.....\...\...
.....Channel ghostSKIN.<.....
...01//<<1/chrysalis *Data pulse*.....\.....\.....
...../*0>**"/:[1 2 3 4 5]>[1].....
..... I.-NT/f*,8nc,>pa//t8r.ns.\.....\.....\\.. .
.....<legion>//<who is it?..... .1....\.....
.....speak to me>/:*(*murmurs*).....
.....<viral shapes>////.....1.....*(^..0?\.....
.....the moon in daylight//,.....

.....nowtouch\\\]begin process:.....
.....<activation:%>\:0.....*.”..\.....
.....>/,,[CONTACT>:<<<.....\.....
.....//>click:/>[ON*].....>

-30-

Nola Blue's body was found on a piece of forgotten ground next to a rubbish-strewn railway line.

Nobody had watched over her during this time. Only the sun, the moon, the sun once more. Two days of waiting as she lay perfectly still. All those hours before she was discovered.

Headline: *Naked and Forsaken! Tragic Mysterious Death of a Music Star.*

Grey and pale and naked she lay there, her clothes beside her. There was no evidence of violence, self-inflicted or otherwise.

She died alone.

The singer's real name was Diana Knowles.

A police cameraman recorded her final position.

No explanation forthcoming for Vision Woman's demise. Doctors mystified.

The police made their enquiries, the press moved in.

Various witnesses were brought forward and given their allotted screen time: a director of music videos, customers in a bar, a press photographer, a garage attendant, a hotel clerk, a teenage girl in a traveller's camp, Nola's personal assistant, her manager. All told their own tales of this beautiful or terrifying figure with the glowing form, with the moving, shimmering pictures on her flesh. Images were shown from Evelyn Moore's glamacam site, footage of the skin in action, heated, awash with colours, shapes, sounds. Faces, guns, explosions, cars, victims, guitars, bodies, sex, noise, music. Other people came forward with their own captures, all showing in varied degrees the same phenomenon. Most astonishing of all: playback of Nola's bodyscreen performance at the Tangent 5 camp, caught on a number of handheld cameras. Finally, that brief moment when Nola had appeared on screen nationwide at the very end of her life, those final moments when she had somehow taken over every broadcast, every signal. The body agleam, fragile, made from all the pictures and sounds sent in to her, everybody's face on view for a second, for less than a second, subliminal, scattercast. And yet Nola's corpse held no traces of such wonders. The skin was perfectly clear of all markings, all evidence of what she was or might have been.

And despite all the witnesses, all the recorded evidence, the real secrets of Nola Blue's last day alive remained hidden from view.

Why her? Just what was it exactly that had taken her over? Would there be others?

Nola's old songs were played for a week or so, complete or in fragments, covering news of the body's discovery, of her life, her childhood, the transformation into a world-market vocalist, the few years of fame, her death. The latest tune rose up the status charts, reaching a position of number three. Her first single was re-promoted. It spent two weeks at number one. Nola's old videos appeared on the music shows and portapops. People sang along with the melodies, bodies moved to the rhythm.

When I see you dance
I just wanna get down and
Dance with you
(Dance with you)
I feel my body sweat
You set my eyes (on fire)
I feel the feeling of
the feeling of the feeling
of the feeling of the
feeling
of the feeling
of desire.
I FEEEEEEEEL the feeling
of desire.

~~~

Joe Palmer watched the screen.

He sat in his bedsit, eating takeaway food. No lights on, no windows open, curtains closed. He hadn't been outside for more than a week, staying off work. Something was happening to him. Stomach ache, occasional sharp pain at the base of the neck. A buzzing noise in his head. Funny taste in the mouth. He couldn't sleep properly, couldn't concentrate on anything other than the screen, the visionplex.

He was looking for signs, signifiers.

Resemblances.

He was scanning the channels, remote in hand, clicking with greasy fingers.

Nola was out there somewhere, he was certain of it. He had seen the news programmes talking of Melissa Gold's spirit haunting the screen. Surely, Nola was also living in that same realm, the land of signals. If he could just locate her, or create a suitable channel or medium for her download. She was gathered in the waves, distributed, her body scattered adrift and waiting for retrieval.
~~~

Pure ghost, pure motion,
pure flow.

At his feet lay the photographs he had taken of her in the dingy hotel room, after they had made love. The pictures glowed with strange colours.

He could hear voices in his head,
the blur and hum of words at the edge of hearing.
Click, click.
His fingers pressing buttons,
Eyes jammed to the screen, held wide.
Waiting.
Click.

Finally, taking off the set's control panel and working with a small screwdriver, Joe fixed the receiver to a dead channel, picking up static wash, grey smear. This was one of the few gaps left in the spectrum, free space, and he sat there staring at the monitor, hoping for a shape to appear, a figure of mist, of flecks, dots, grain, glips, glitches, spikes, speckles, hiss, crackles, crosstalk, overload, white noise. Palmer was the perfect spectator, an addict of pirate frequencies. He could not surrender, not now, and he felt heartbroken over what he had seen and let astray that night, and what he'd felt in those few hours: the gentle burn of flesh under his touch, the flicker of perspiration over melting pictures, representations of the world unfolding in crazy detail on a woman's skin, on her body, the living body of image in his scarred and pitiful arms and he'd let her go free, he'd lost her.

Lost...melting away...

He could only hope that something more than love had passed between them.

This world was too crowded, that was the trouble. It was too earthy, too physical for such fragile souls. Nola had escaped from the bodily realm, entering the ether.

That had to be the way, the only way out for her.

Her body was clear, normal, when it was found, the flesh wiped clean of the countless downloads and broadcasts. But those images had to be somewhere, they couldn't just fade away, he couldn't let himself think that.

It was too much of a loss, too painful.

No, the images floated on, and all he could do now was watch and wait, to be the viewer, become the audience,
become the most ravenous of all eyes
and by so doing give presence to the lost ones,
the silent travellers through air and wires,
like this one particular shape that moved now on his screen

amid the grey fuzz
a figure of static blur...

~~~

Joseph fell asleep.
He slept and drifted, the viewer,
drifted, dreaming,
his body set in tingle mode.
His skin shivering:
his face clouded by pictures,
blue light, murmurs,
the signal taking over.
And now the woman danced before him
Nola
a silhouette
of dust and numbers
held for a second, moonlit
touching
then scattered.
Joe's flesh buzzed with heat
with flicker
as slowly the bruise
materialised on his skin.
The first pictures were forming.

And soon the ghosts of television
will walk freely through
the studios and back lots;
they will be seen moving
with their own secret purpose
through location shots.
Across our countless screens
they will wander unseen,
pale revenants with programmes
of their own to make,
still haunted by cameras,
tongueless now, bodiless,
but veined with fire and image.
~~~

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For Vana, with love.

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About the author

Jeff Noon was born in 1957 in Manchester, England. He was trained in the visual arts and drama, and was musically active in the post-punk scene, before starting to write plays for the theatre in the 1980s.

His first novel, *Vurt*, published in 1993, won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best Science Fiction novel. He has also won the John W. Campbell Award. His stage and radio plays include *Woundings*, *The Modernists* and *Dead Code*. He is currently writing and developing screenplays, as well as planning other novels and stories.

General news and comments as well as hundreds of fiction spores can be found at his twitter page *@jeffnoon*

The microspore site is a community page bringing together words, music and imagery: *microspores.tumblr.com/start*

Jeff's main site, *metamorphiction.com*, contains new stories, avant-pulp experiments, essays, remix manuals, and lots of information on all his past works.

Books by Jeff Noon

Vurt
Pollen
Automated Alice
Nymphomation
Pixel Juice
Needle in The Groove
Cobralingus
Falling Out of Cars
Channel SK1N
Pixel Dust

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VURT

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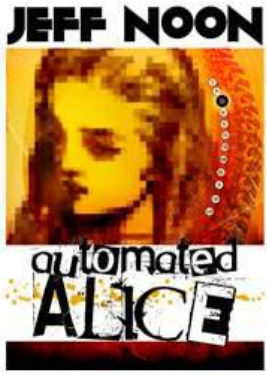
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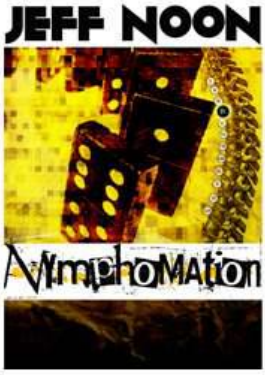
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